

## Akron's 2009 Championship Run Special To Sarbaugh

Written by {ga=consigliere}

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The 2009 Akron Aeros won the Eastern League Championship, their third title in franchise history and third in the last seven years. For Aeros fans who ventured to the ballpark on a nightly basis last year they saw exciting baseball night in and night out with about as talented a roster as you will find in Double-A. In addition to the talent, the players were also hard workers and really meshed well as a team.

For former Akron manager Mike Sarbaugh, it was a fun ride and a joy to be part of such a special team last year. Be it the minor leagues or the major leagues, championships are rare, and Sarbaugh made it a point to tell his players to cherish what they had accomplished as a team and how hard it is to come out at the end on top.

"As I told the guys after we won it, I got them together [in the locker room] and I told them they should sit back and appreciate what kind of year we had because they don't come along that often," said Sarbaugh, who is now the manager for the Indians Triple-A affiliate in Columbus. "I think it was one of the best teams I have been around that seemed to get along all year long. That's hard to do with guy's coming in and out, moving up and moving down. It just seemed like the guys coming in from Kinston or wherever seemed to fit right in and we really didn't miss a beat."

The biggest cog to the Akron machine last year was catcher Carlos Santana who was named the Eastern League MVP. He was the third Akron player to win MVP honors, joining Jordan Brown (2007) and Victor Martinez (2002). He dominated the league in almost every category as he finished 11th in the league in batting average (.290), 3rd in runs (91), 2nd in HR (23), 2nd in RBI (97), 1st in walks (90, 15 more than 2nd place player), 4th in total bases (227), 2nd in on-base percentage (.413), 1st in slugging percentage (.530), and 1st in OPS (.943).

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While Santana's offense paced the team, it was his improved defense and handling of the pitching staff which Sarbaugh feels may have had just as much of a positive impact on the team.

"You can't say enough about what Carlos did," said Sarbaugh. "We all knew going in that he was going to be pretty special offensively, but the big thing that we were trying to get across was his [development] behind the plate. I give Carlos credit as he really worked hard and I think from the beginning of the year to the end of the year he made tremendous strides. It is a credit to the work he put in and it just shows the ability he has to pick up things and get better. He is a special player and is very similar offensively to what Victor Martinez was when he was in Akron and I was there as a hitting coach. That says a lot there, especially with what Victor has done in the game. A switch-hitting catcher with the ability he has does not come around often."

Right-handed pitcher Hector Rondon and left-handed pitcher Chuck Lofgren looked like they were in for big years after great starts to their season at Akron last year, but both were promoted to Columbus by midseason. With their loss in the rotation, right-handers Jeanmar Gomez and Josh Tomlin stepped up and ended up being the workhorses in the rotation all year.

Gomez started the season at High-A Kinston, but was in Akron by early May. He ended up making 22 starts for Akron and went 10-4 with a 3.43 ERA, and in the process was named the Eastern League Pitcher of the Year. He finished 6th in the league in wins (10), 3rd in ERA (3.43), and 3rd in WHIP (1.27), but his most memorable start of the year came on May 21st when he threw a perfect game.

"The one thing I think helped was when Jeanmar came [to Akron] he had already played with a lot of the guys so I think that helped him with the transition," said Sarbaugh. "But you could just see the confidence build with each start. The two starts which really stand out are of course the perfect game, but the start before that I think he threw eight shutout innings against Altoona. He just continued to get better and it seemed like when the situation got tough he really battled. You could really tell he grew especially with his confidence, and he was a big part of the 2009 team that's for sure."

Tomlin was another key piece as he battled and gave Akron a chance to win every time out. He made 26 starts and went 14-9 with a 4.16 ERA, and finished the year ranked 11th in the Eastern League in ERA (4.16), 1st in wins (14), 2nd in strikeouts (125) and 2nd in WHIP (1.21). He also became just the third pitcher in Akron history with 14 or more wins in a season, joining Paul Byrd (14 wins in 1992) and single-season leader Adam Miller (15 wins in 2006). He was at his best in his two starts in the Eastern League Playoffs as he went 2-0 with a 1.93 ERA going 14.0 innings and allowing just eight hits, no walks, and racking up 15 strikeouts.

"Josh takes the ball every fifth day and he knows how to pitch," said Sarbaugh. "He has good stuff and great command. You know what you are going to get from Josh as he is very reliable, controls a running game, and does everything we ask of him. He was huge for us. You talk about how to win a championship you have to have a lot of things come together, and he had two big playoff starts for us. He was outstanding."

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While the starting rotation was in flux most of the year, the bullpen may have been the most stable and consistent component of the team all year. Six relievers finished the year with an ERA under 3.25, and every time they came into a game in the 6th or 7th inning they almost always locked down the opponent, especially in the second half of the season.

"I think with the type of bullpen we had those guys were strike-throwers," said Sarbaugh. "Steven Wright was 10-0, and you don't see that very often from a bullpen guy. What Josh Judy did in the second half in the closer's role [was impressive]. Carlton Smith, Zach Putnam, Erik Stiller, Neil Wagner, Vinnie Pestano, you just couldn't ask for a better group as a bullpen that went out and attacked hitters and got ahead. They were outstanding. When I talked to [Pitching Coach] Ruben [Niebla] when we looked back on it, I think our bullpen ERA might have been under a two the second half of the season, which is unbelievable."

While Santana was the main source of firepower in the lineup, outfielder Jose Constanza was the igniter to the offense. He showed a much improved approach at the plate by drawing more walks and became a greater nuisance on the basepaths. He finished the season ranked 1st in the league in runs (98), 10th in hits (137), 3rd in triples (7), 2nd in walks (75), 1st in stolen bases (49), and 8th in on-base percentage (.378). His 49 stolen bases set an Akron franchise record (42, Eider Torres in 2006), and his 98 runs scored is 2nd all time in franchise history (Omar Ramirez 116 runs in 1993).

"When you look at the lineup with Jose at the top and the pressure he puts on the defense, it was a good combination," said Sarbaugh. "For any good club the leadoff spot is huge. It is just kind of what sets what is going to happen in a game. Just the pressure he put on them where when he would get on base and now all of a sudden they are worried about him stealing a base and not worrying about a hitter much. He was just huge for us."

Outfielder John Drennen seemed to ignite the flames to what looked like a fading baseball career as after a slow start to his season he became an important part of the team and key player for Akron in the playoffs. After hitting just .191 with 1 HR, 10 RBI and a .601 OPS in 21 games he was actually sent down to Kinston for about three weeks in late May, but when he returned in June he was a different looking player and had a strong finish to his season where he hit .296 with 7 HR, 30 RBI and a .819 OPS in 72 games. He was simply electric in September where in 13 combined games in the regular season and playoffs he hit .377 with 6 HR and a 1.174 OPS.

"John started the year with us and got off to an okay start and struggled in May a little bit," said Sarbaugh. "I think when he went back to Kinston and having to go down it opened his eyes a little bit, and I think when he came back it seemed like he had a different attitude and didn't put as much pressure on himself and just went out and played. I think whenever you are close to the playoffs or in them, you can't rely on your 3-4-5 guys as you gotta have guys at the top and bottom who contribute, and that is what John did. That's what it takes to win a league like we did as it takes the whole team. John was a big part of that as he really got hot toward the end of the season and carried it into the playoffs."

Coming off an MVP season at Kinston in 2008, first baseman Beau Mills had a solid but

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unspectacular year where in 135 games he hit .267 with 14 HR, 83 RBI and a .724 OPS. It was an off year for him as far as expectations go, but Sarbaugh felt he still had a good year.

"I think Beau had a pretty solid year," said Sarbaugh. "I know he probably would have liked to have a better year, but when you look at his numbers I think he had a good year. It is just part of their development, and sometimes you have to get through some adversity and I think he dealt with it very well."

On the defensive side of things, shortstop Carlos Rivero was the leader. He once again struggled with his numbers in the early going as he hit just .220 with 1 HR, 25 RBI and a .569 OPS in the first half of the season, but he finished strong where after the All Star break he hit .280 with 6 HR, 33 RBI and a .797 OPS. But it was his defense at the most important position on the field which provided to have the biggest impact to the team.

"I think Rivero is a very reliable shortstop as he has great hands, is very accurate with his throws, and is just a really solid shortstop," said Sarbaugh. "He got off to a little bit of a tough start in the first half, but that is part of his development. He hasn't repeated a level and I think that is part of why in the past he has gotten off to slow starts. It is part of learning, getting comfortable, and making adjustments. He is a good looking player."

There were lots of other players who contributed to varying degrees to Akron's successful 2009 title run. Be it utility infielder Cristo Arnal who filled in for second baseman Josh Rodriguez who was injured early in the season and missed over a 100 games, utility player Jerad Head's exceptional versatility and consistency, outfielder Matt McBride's production at the plate, and so many more.

It was just a team that gelled and fit together well both on the diamond and in the clubhouse, which is often a recipe for success.

"It was a special team," said Sarbaugh, "and I know when I look back that it will be a very special year for myself and those guys."