



BALTIMORE LEDGER-STAR

MAY 24, 2032 · THE BALTIMORE BLUE CRABS BEAT

Six losses in six tries against Somerville

BY ROSALIND FEENEY · BALTIMORE LEDGER-STAR

Baltimore is 25-23, fourth in the Sapphire, six back, and carrying the eighth-largest payroll in the league. At most clubs that is a sentence and not a story.

Here is why it is a story. Steve B. has run this baseball team since 2001 and has now spent nine seasons running it in Baltimore. Eight of those nine ended in the postseason. Not one of the eight reached a championship series. The last time this franchise played for a title it was 2013, and it was wearing a Washington uniform in front of people who now root for nothing in particular.

So the standings are not really the question in May. The question is whether anything about this club suggests the ninth try ends somewhere the other eight did not, and the early evidence cuts both ways, and one piece of it cuts deep.

Start with the piece that cuts.

Against Somerville, the Blue Crabs are 0-6. Swept in Somerville to open the season, swept at home three weeks later. Six losses, and not one of them by more than three runs, which is the specific kind of beating that offers you no explanation to hide behind. Somerville is 31-17 and has not lost three straight to anybody else all year.

You know why that one sits where it sits.

These two clubs have met in each of the last two Octobers, and each time the team with no business winning won in four straight. In 2030 this club took 100 games and the division flag, and an 88-74 Somerville swept it out of the wild card round. In 2031 it ran the other way: 83-80, fifth place, a postseason berth this city half apologized for, and Jorge Soto took a wild card series MVP out of a four-game sweep of a 105-win Somerville club.

One apiece, both sweeps, neither one sensible at the time. That is the whole relationship, and it is why nobody in this town looks at 0-6 in May and concludes a thing about October, and also why everybody looks at it anyway.

Baltimore went 17-19 inside the division and is 8-4 since the crossover. The first figure is a losing record against the only opponents who matter for a division title. The second is 12 games, and 12 games is not a measurement, it is a rumor.

What the schedule does not explain is the shape underneath it, which has not moved in either stretch. Against clubs with a losing record today, this team is 19-7. Against clubs with a winning record, 6-16. That is a club that beats what it is supposed to beat and loses to the rest, which is a real skill and a real ceiling in the same sentence.

The payroll is \$165.9 million, eighth-highest in the league and second-highest in this division, and the two largest line items on it have thrown a combined 81 2/3 innings.

Steve Westbrook is making \$31.6 million and is 2-6 with a 4.25 earned run average in 10 starts. The record is not really his fault, since this team has scored for him about the way it has scored for everyone, but the earned run average is his. Roy Bell is making \$26 million, won Cy Young Awards before he got here, went on the injured list on March 29 and stayed there 36 days, and has made four starts since, in which he walked one man in 22 1/3 innings and gave up four home runs. On the strength of those four starts he is the best thing in the rotation. On the strength of the calendar he has been available for less than half the season. B.J. Reyna was signed in February for \$17 million on a one-year deal and has a 6.34 earned run average, which is what a one-year deal in February is sometimes for.

What has actually pitched well is cheaper. Sam Kutka has struck out 59 in 54 innings with a 0.91 WHIP and a 2.83 earned run average, and he is making \$6.5 million. Jake McHan is 6-1 and making the league minimum. Johnny Cunnane has 14 saves, third-most in the league, on \$3.2 million. The bullpen has a 3.60 earned run average and has blown six. The rotation has a 4.15 and ranks 17th.

That is the shape of it: a middling staff carried by its cheap half, in front of an offense that is ninth in home runs and 21st in on-base percentage. Jorge Soto is hitting .297 with 10 home runs. Francisco Rodriguez is at .324 in 32 games. Fabio Cardia is at .308. Matt Lamberson, at \$17.5 million through 2035, is hitting .208, and Victor Barboza is at .195 and on the injured list, and Joe Suchan is at .211, and those three are signed through 2034 and 2035 between them.

The front office spent its winter on draft picks rather than players. Jason Long went to Chicago on New Year's Eve and came back as four selections, two of which this club has just spent. It had no first-round pick to spend at all, having sent that to Chicago too, back in 2030, so the draft opened here in the second round with David Andrews and Wibawa Kathirithamby. On a club nine years into this and still looking for its first

championship series, a winter spent collecting other people's late selections is a choice worth asking about out loud.

The most encouraging paragraph in this whole operation is not in Baltimore at all. Laurel is 19-5 in High-A. Severna Park is in first in Triple-A and Arnold is tied for first in Double-A.

The four who matter are all a phone call from Baltimore. Alex Mojica is hitting .276 with four home runs at Severna Park and Dave Dougherty is in the same lineup. Howard Dupuis has 32 strikeouts in 29 innings at Arnold, and Matt Locher a 1.06 earned run average over 17 innings at Triple-A. This organization has spent nine years shopping for the last piece every July, and for the first time in a while it may not have to.

None of that helps this pitching staff in June. But the pipeline is the healthiest part of this organization right now, and it has been quietly getting healthier while the big-league club treads water on a \$165.9 million payroll.

So: 25-23, a club that handles what it should and loses to what it should not, six losses in six tries against the team that has ended two of the last two seasons one way or the other, a farm system worth watching, and nine years of Octobers that all stopped in the same place.

Somerville comes back around. It always does. And after nine years of this you stop trying to guess what happens when it does, because the last two times anybody guessed, the underdog swept.