



LA PRESSE SPORTIVE

MAY 24, 2032 · THE MONTREAL MACHINE BEAT

Dean Salvucci is hitting .193 and leads the league in home runs

BY ÉTIENNE CHARBONNEAU · LA PRESSE SPORTIVE

The English column, twice a week, as always.

Twenty-seven years ago this month the Machine were in the middle of the season that would become the only championship this city has. The anniversary passes in November, not in May, and there is no reason to bring it up now except that for two decades it was the only thing there was to bring up, and habits formed over twenty years do not dissolve because a team starts winning.

They are winning. It should be said plainly at the top, since the rest of this will not be entirely plain.

Montreal is 26-22, second in the Sapphire, five games behind Somerville, three clear of the last postseason place in the conference. That follows 96 wins in 2030 and 95 in 2031 and two consecutive Octobers, which means the drought this column spent nineteen years describing ended two springs ago and a certain kind of Montreal sportswriting has had to find something else to do with itself.

Here is what it should be doing. This club has the best pitching staff in The Big League. Not the best in the division, not among the best. First of 32 in earned run average at 3.17, first in runs allowed with 165, first in WHIP at 1.10, and first in fewest walks issued with 113, which is 71 fewer than Chicago has given away. The starters alone have a 3.13 earned run average, which is also the best in the league. The run differential is plus-45. Only Somerville, at plus-61, is better in this division, and every other club in it is at plus-15 or worse.

None of the four sentences above contains a word of poetry and all four of them are true, and it has taken this column eight weeks to type them.

A word about the shape of the season, since it explains why nobody is sure what they are looking at. The Machine went 21-15 inside the division and 5-7 in the twelve games since the crossover. Which means the best pitching staff in baseball has been measured against the rest of baseball for twelve days, and a man who has spent twenty years distrusting good news is not going to be talked out of his caution by twelve days.

Part of the reluctance is that the staff keeps disappearing. Sam Kelly is 5-0 with a 1.50 earned run average and a 0.88 WHIP in seven starts, and he is on the 60-day list. T.J. Larson is 3-0 with a 2.66 in four starts and he is on the 60-day list. Jaden Ruchti signed for \$10 million over five years on April 3 and has spent 42 days on the injured list since. Jon Morales, who is hitting .360 in the handful of games he has played, is on the 60-day list. Danny Guzman and Francisco Lopez, both signed this winter, are on the 60-day list. That is seven men, and five more are playing through something day to day, including Jong-su Im, the \$17 million pitcher, who is 5-3 with a 3.28 anyway.

And the staff keeps being the best in the league regardless. Greg Tarver is 38 years old, has a 1.21 earned run average, and has walked exactly one batter in 22 1/3 innings. Dave Santillan is 24, has 12 saves and a 0.48 WHIP, which is not a number that appears in a season very often at all. Jimmy Smith has a 2.06 in seven starts. Whoever is taken away, the next one holds.

The hitting is the other thing, and it is where the omens live this year.

This lineup is 27th in the league in batting average at .229 and 25th in on-base percentage, and it is 11th in home runs. It scores its runs in a lump or not at all. It has been shut out three times and has thrown four shutouts of its own. And at the center of it stands Dean Salvucci, who is hitting .193.

Dean Salvucci also leads the entire league in home runs with 20.

Sit with that a moment, because the record book will not hold it for long. A batting average of .193 and a slugging percentage of .580. Twenty home runs and 35 runs batted in and 37 runs scored in 47 games, and fewer than one hit in every five times up. There is no honest way to describe this as a good or a bad season. It is a season in a language of its own, and it will either end with 50 home runs and an argument in every bar on Saint-Laurent, or it will end in the middle of July when the thing that is holding it up quietly stops.

Ryan Weigold is hitting .202. Gabe Rocke, signed through 2035, is at .173. Yuigo Sakaguchi at .272 with 33 runs batted in is the closest thing this order has to steadiness, and Kaden Allen, signed in January at 32 years old, is at .314 in a part-time role and has been better than anyone expected.

Josh A. has run this club since 2021, arriving from Huron, and on Opening Day he sent a 36-year-old pitcher to Denver and a minor league arm to Rochester, and took back a 2033 tenth-round pick and a 2033 eleventh. Two transactions on the morning of the first game, both of them subtractions, both paid for in selections that will not be made for eighteen months. He has not said much since. He does not say much generally, and after two decades of covering a franchise that said nothing because there was nothing to say, it

is difficult to know how to read silence coming out of a first-place-adjacent clubhouse. The two things are not the same and they sound identical.

Below the big club there is a great deal going on, and for once the part worth attention is not the batting averages. Gattineau is 19-5 and Sherbrooke is 24-12.

At Sherbrooke there is a 23-year-old named Chris Shere who has struck out 34 men in 35 1/3 innings and carries an earned run average of 7.64, which is the sort of line that means one of two things and will not say which for another year. David Bustamante is in the same rotation with a 1.50 across 12. At Quebec, Jim Fricke has a 0.87 and Willie Solis is reaching base at .378. And at Trois-Rivieres, which has not opened its season, there is a 17-year-old named Oscar Lopez about whom there is nothing whatever to report and who is, on paper, one of the two best arms in this organization.

The averages are at High-A. Andy Shellhammer is slugging .693, Jonathan Saunders is hitting .386, and Moises Morales is at .397 up at Sherbrooke. Phil Payne, the third-round pick from 2030, has a .472 on-base percentage, and of those four he is the one this club is actually counting on.

This organization has not had this many arms moving at once in living memory, and living memory here is unusually long.

So the ledger, for a Tuesday in May: the best pitching in baseball, a hitter batting .193 who leads the league in home runs, seven men on the injured list, a general manager who sold on Opening Day, and second place.

This city spent twenty years learning to love a thing that was not there. The harder discipline, it turns out, is loving one that is.