



TIMES-CRESCENT

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The most-worked rotation in baseball, and a 20-28 record to show for it

BY THÉO DELACROIX · TIMES-CRESCENT

There is a rhythm to a baseball season the way there is a rhythm to anything that goes on for six months, and the thing about this one is that it keeps losing the beat in the same bar.

Twenty-five games decided by a single run. The Mudcats have lost 15 of them.

That is the season, and it is worth saying before anything else, because it is the difference between 20-28 and something respectable, and because a team that loses ten more one-run games than it wins is not usually a bad team. It is usually a tired one.

Look at what is being asked of the people who pitch here. New Orleans starting pitchers have thrown 287 innings, more than any rotation in The Big League. The bullpen has thrown 148, the fewest of any relief corps in the league. Five men take the ball and are asked to stay out there, and then the seventh inning arrives and the club has nine blown saves against 14 converted and a relief earned run average of 4.85, 29th of 32. The starters are covering for a bullpen that cannot hold what they hand it, and they are covering by pitching deeper, and deeper is how arms get used up in July.

Joe Barnes has been magnificent and has nothing to show for it. A 2.86 earned run average across 10 starts, 81 strikeouts, fifth-most in the league, a 0.97 WHIP, four home runs allowed in 66 innings, and a record of 2-4. He has a Cy Young Award on a shelf somewhere and he is in the last year of a \$26.5 million contract and this club has given him almost nothing behind it. Bill Dixon is 24 and has a 3.90 in 10 starts and is going to be good for a long while.

After those two: John Williams has given up 14 home runs in 58 2/3 innings. David Mills is 2-7. Nate Trout is 23 and has a 6.10. The staff as a whole has allowed 70 home runs, more than all but three clubs in baseball.

There is a shape to the calendar too. The Mudcats went 14-22 against the seven clubs they know best and 6-6 since the crossover. Which means the fifteen one-run losses were mostly inflicted by neighbors, and a man can carry a thing like that into July.

And the hitting, which is the part that confounds. This lineup is fourth in the league in batting average at .259 and fifth in on-base percentage at .325, and it has scored 209 runs, 19th. It gets men on and leaves them there. Andy Chenault is hitting .320 with a .547 slugging percentage and nine home runs and is the best player on this team by some distance. Mark Williams is at .277 with a .353 on-base percentage and took a player of the week award a week ago Monday. Jose Nolasco has nine home runs.

Then the winter's work, and here the tempo slows.

Vinny Aguilar was signed on January 22 for \$16 million. He has played 18 games and is hitting .180. Travis Williams was signed on February 20 for \$11 million; he is 34, he owns three Platinum Sticks and a Great Glove, and he is hitting .217 with a .270 on-base percentage. Trevor Jordan, 30, is hitting .261. Will Shore, 31, is hitting .257. Four signings, four men on the wrong side of 30, \$32.5 million committed, and no trades at all in the offseason or since.

Eric McReynolds is 34, was drafted by this organization in 2015, and is in his 18th professional season here. He has a Rookie of the Year award, two Platinum Sticks and a Great Glove, and he was on the 2017 team, and he is hitting .234 in 26 games in the last year of a \$10 million contract.

Ryan has run this club, and managed it, since 2008. Twenty-one postseason appearances in franchise history and two rings, and 94 wins as recently as 2029, and then 77-85, and then 69-93, and now 20-28 and 12 games out with a bullpen ranked 29th. He has never had to take a roster apart. There has never been a season here where that was the obvious thing to do, and the roster he built has aged the way rosters do, quietly and then all at once, and the men he signed this winter to hold it together are 30, 31, 34 and 34.

It is not time to call anything by its name. A team that has lost 15 one-run games has not been outplayed by ten games' worth of baseball; it has been unlucky in a specific and correctable way, and there are 114 games left, and Joe Barnes takes the ball every fifth day.

What is worth saying, in the middle of May, in a paper that has covered all of it: the pipeline underneath has started running again, and it is running in a different direction from the one the box scores point at. Baton Rouge is in first. Alejandro Vargas is batting .220 there across 166 plate appearances, and he is the most valuable young player this organization has on a field anywhere. Felipe Rodriquez is in the same lineup at .286.

At Gulfport, which is 16-20 and losing, Adam Marek has struck out 15 in 10 1/3 innings and Jose Ramirez is reaching base at .400 in a sample too small to carry weight. At Shreveport, Brett Kulakowski is

hitting .321. At Acadiana, Jorge Quito has an 8.10 earned run average across ten innings, which is not yet a sentence about a pitcher.

Eric Beverley is slugging .628 at Baton Rouge and Jorge Oviedo, the 30th overall pick in 2029, is hitting .303 at Acadiana. Tom Fredericks is slugging .602 at High-A. Paul Smith is hitting .351 at Baton Rouge and Jayden Sheffield .396. Hector Herreria has a 2.49 over 50 innings and Paulino Ozment a 2.76.

And the best arm in the organization has not thrown a pitch that counts. Kevin Zaragoza is 17 and Beaumont has not opened its season.

The good years ended here. These are the men who would have to begin the next ones, and most of them are not hitting yet. This organization has not had this many young men worth naming in a long time, and did not appear to be looking for them.

The rhythm section is changing. The song is not over. But you can hear it.