



# THE OKLAHOMAN SPORTS DESK

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## Why can Oklahoma City not win on the road?

BY MARGUERITE YOO · THE OKLAHOMAN SPORTS DESK

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**R**un the home and road splits for all 32 clubs and this one is an outlier.

The Outlaws are 19-8 in Oklahoma City and 8-13 outside it. That is a .704 club at home and a .381 club on the road, the widest such split of any team currently over .500, and it is the difference between a team in first place and a team fighting for the last postseason spot.

There is no obvious mechanism. The park is the park. The lineup is the lineup. The pitching staff has a 3.75 earned run average and it does not change shape when the plane lands. Sometimes a 48-game sample is simply a 48-game sample, and 21 road games is not enough to conclude anything, and pointing that out is more honest than building a theory around it. But it is the first thing in this report and it will be the first thing in the next one too, because if it holds through July it stops being noise.

The record is 27-21, fourth in the Topaz, five behind Milwaukee, two clear of the last playoff position in the conference. That fourth-place standing understates things: Milwaukee is tied with Galveston for the best record in baseball, Kansas City is tied for third, and Huron is 28-20. Four of the top ten clubs in the league are in this division. A 27-21 team is in fourth place here and would be in second almost anywhere else.

The home-road split has a confound in it, and it is worth naming before anyone builds a theory on the split itself. Oklahoma City went 18-18 inside a division holding four of the top ten clubs in the league, and 9-3 in the twelve games since the crossover. Two splits, one of them possibly an artifact of the other, and 48 games is not enough to separate them. Both get written down. Neither gets explained yet.

The strengths are specific and they are all on the pitching side.

This staff has walked 123 batters, third-fewest in the league. It has allowed 45 home runs, fourth-fewest. Its WHIP of 1.18 is fourth-best. It has blown three saves all season, which is the third-lowest total anywhere. Those four numbers describe a staff that does not give anything away, and a staff that does not give anything away is the profile that holds up in a short series, which is the only context in which this franchise's problem has ever shown itself.

Brian Lee has a 1.70 earned run average, a 0.96 WHIP and 63 strikeouts over 10 starts, and he is 26 and signed through 2034. Alex Cardenas, signed in February for one year at \$7.4 million, is 6-2 with a 3.46 at 33. Shane Drew has 13 saves and a 1.35 earned run average and has walked three men all year. Justin Queen has 25 strikeouts against three walks. Josh Aikins has a 2.29.

At the plate the picture is narrower. Jeremy Porten is 25, is hitting .327 with a .436 on-base percentage and a .637 slugging percentage, has 13 home runs, fifth-most in the league, and is signed through 2036 at \$7.2 million. He is the most valuable asset in this organization by a distance and it is not a close call. Pedro Hernandez is hitting .310 with a .570 slugging percentage in 31 games. Jacob Sheets is at .304.

After those three, the money has not produced. Ted Ketron was signed on January 2 for three years at \$18 million and is hitting .220, though 11 home runs and 32 runs batted in means the production has arrived in a lumpier form than the batting average suggests. Manny Jimenez, at \$22 million through 2034, is hitting .219. Javier Estevez, at \$10.8 million through 2034, is at .214. Mike Tarrant, signed in January at \$9 million for three years, is at .233 and on the injured list. Steve Welch is hitting .087 in 79 plate appearances.

Six free agents signed in January and February, \$37 million of new annual commitment, and the club is 27-21. So the additions are not the story either way yet.

The payroll is \$179.1 million, sixth in the league.

Downstairs: Napanee is 18-6 and Wellington is 15-9 and Cobourg is 11-25.

Felix Rosario is 24, at Cobourg, and has a 2.17 earned run average with 43 strikeouts across 49 2/3 innings. He is the one man in this system a rival club would ask about by name.

The rest is a column of High-A batting averages. Billy Singleton, a seventh-round pick last June, is hitting .377 with a .459 on-base percentage. Sean Calvert is at .348 with a .609 slugging percentage. Max Pelletier, a fourth-rounder from the same draft, is at .346. Luis Suarez has a .431 on-base percentage. Danny Blackwell is hitting .324 at Belleville and Dustin Hayes has a 2.82 there.

Rich Byrne has a 2.02 at Napanee and Brad Hilger is 5-1 at Belleville, and both of them are likelier to stand on this mound than anybody currently hitting .377. That is not a complaint about the hitters. It is a description of what this organization has spent four drafts selecting.

Twenty-two postseason appearances, more than any franchise in The Big League. Four conference championship series, four losses, and no club in this league's history has been to October more times without playing for a title. Last October was the 22nd, after a 100-win season and a division championship, and it ended two rounds short again.

Nothing about 27-21 on May 24 speaks to that. Nothing about a regular season ever has here, which is the entire difficulty. What can be said is that the pitching staff that has taken this club to all those Octobers has usually been a good one, and this one walks nobody and gives up nothing over the fence, and those are the two things that have most reliably separated the clubs that go deep from the clubs that go home.

The road record is 8-13. Watch that.