



RICHMOND DISPATCH-LEDGER

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Virginia started 0-6 and has been winning ever since

BY **BO THREADGILL** · RICHMOND DISPATCH-LEDGER

Opening day, at home, against Kansas City, a one-run loss. Then another. Then a third, and the series was gone, and then three more in Milwaukee, and it was the seventh of April before this baseball team won a game.

Nought and six. In a building that had watched this same franchise win three consecutive Game Sevens on the road five months earlier.

By the fourth of May the record was 12-20, eight games under, and the season had the settled look of a season that has already decided what it is going to be.

They have gone 11-5 since. Eight of the last ten. Three in a row coming into tonight, a series taken in Phoenix, a sweep of Myrtle Beach before that, three of four from Vancouver before that. The record is 23-25, two games out of the last postseason place in the conference, and everything that looked settled on the fourth of May is unsettled again.

That is twice now inside eight months that this club has been left for dead and declined to stay that way, and anybody who watched last September knows better than to write the sentence that comes next.

And the timing of it is the part to hold on to. Virginia went 14-22 inside the division, worst but one in the Topaz, and is 9-3 since the crossover, which ties five other clubs for the best mark in baseball. Every one of those eight wins in the last ten came against somebody who does not play here often.

The pitching is why, and it starts with a 26-year-old on the league minimum.

Phil Church has struck out 95 batters. That is the second-highest total of any pitcher in The Big League, behind one man. He has a 3.17 earned run average across 11 starts and a 1.16 WHIP, and he walks more men

than anybody would like, 33 of them, and then he strikes out the next two and it does not matter. There has not been an arm like that in this rotation since the 2025 club.

Behind him, the bullpen has been the best unit on the roster and one of the best in baseball. A 3.07 earned run average, fifth of 32. Zeke Tovar has a 1.83 with 60 strikeouts in 44 innings, a 0.77 WHIP, and 10 saves. Allen Crowe has a 1.35 and has not walked a batter all season. Cory Montgomery has not allowed an earned run in 11 appearances. Aaron Gillespie has a 2.57 with seven holds. John Gulbrandson has a 0.98 WHIP. Tim Breckenridge has a 0.97.

Six relievers. The staff as a whole has 451 strikeouts, third-most in the league, and has allowed 188 runs, eighth-fewest.

The lineup is the problem and it is a specific one. Forty-one home runs, 30th of 32. A slugging percentage of .384, 24th. The club is ninth in batting average and fourth-fewest in strikeouts, which means the contact is there and nothing is going anywhere once it is made. Two hundred seven runs, 22nd.

Chris Schmotzer is the exception and he is 23 years old and makes \$500,000 and is hitting .322 with a .382 on-base percentage and a .533 slugging percentage and has scored 32 runs. Chris Wilson, who came over from Tampa Bay on New Year's Eve for a fourth- and a seventh-round pick, is hitting .285 with a .368 on-base percentage. Joey Powell is at .278, Pio Takami at .288.

And then Danny Meza, who is owed \$26 million a year through 2034, is hitting .221. Jesus Sifuentes, who has a Rookie of the Year award and a Platinum Stick, is hitting .215. Ted Donohue is at .129. Jacob Hickenbottom, at \$17 million, and Curt Graham, at \$16 million, are both on the 60-day injured list and between them have contributed nothing at all to this season. That is \$33 million standing in a training room.

Kaden C. is in his second season. He inherited a roster assembled by two other men in two previous years, took it to a championship series in the strangest October this league has ever staged, and has spent this winter doing quiet things: Mike Dibrell for two years, Jim Bergeman for three, Keith Bornstein and Aaron Gillespie for the bullpen, and two picks spent on Chris Wilson. Four signings, one trade, nothing loud. Gillespie has a 2.57 and Dibrell has a 3.76 and Wilson is hitting .285, and that is three of five working, which is a better rate than most winters produce anywhere.

The farm is where this gets hard to look at. Shenandoah is 3-21. Johnson City is 12-24. Lynchburg is 10-14. Three of the four affiliates that have started are in the bottom half of their divisions and one of them is historically bad.

Peninsula is 22-14 and there is something there. Miguel Sepillo is hitting .371 and Manuel Castellanos .310 with a .396 on-base percentage, and both are about as far along as they are likely to get. Jonathan Sawyer is hitting .231 in the same lineup and is the better prospect of the three by a distance. Billy Gullett is slugging .500 at Johnson City.

The one worth the drive is at Lynchburg, on a club that is losing. Dave Shahan is 20 years old, reaching base at .367 with three home runs, and he is the best young hitter this organization has had in some years. Jonathan Stech is 19 on the same roster and has barely played.

Below that, at Chattanooga and New Castle, where nothing has started, there are four more the club will talk about at length: Pat Taylor, Travis McLaughlin, Enrique Guzman and Izzy Samora, none of them older than 19. Not one of them has played a game that counts, and in a season like this one that is very nearly the appeal.

So the summer ahead looks like this. A rotation with one genuine front-line arm, a bullpen that can hold anything it is handed, a lineup that cannot drive the ball, \$33 million of it in the trainer's room, and two games between here and October.

Last year this club was nine games under on the last day of August. It went 18-8 in September, won three Game Sevens on the road, and played for a championship. There is no reason to expect that again and no basis for ruling it out, and the one thing the last two seasons have established beyond argument is that whatever this franchise is, it is not the kind you can project.

Eleven and five. Eight of ten. The season is open again.