BALTIMORE LEDGER-STAR

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Crabs finally beat Moneyline, then stop winning series

BY **ROSALIND FEENEY** · BALTIMORE LEDGER-STAR

On July 18, in Somerville, Antonio Amaya and two relievers held the Moneyline to one run, and Baltimore won 3-1. It was the ninth meeting of the season and the first win. I wrote in May that nobody in this town should conclude a thing from 0-6, and the same rule holds at 1-8. It turned nothing around. Baltimore has not won a series since.

That is the part of the last ten weeks worth sitting with. Baltimore left May at 25-23 and went 26-16 from there, which is as good a stretch of baseball as this club has played since it came home. Six straight wins to open June. A four-game sweep in Rochester. Sweeps at Oklahoma City and at home against Toronto around the Fourth. On July 11 the Blue Crabs were 51-39, 12 over, the high mark of the year.

Then San Juan took two of three. Milwaukee took two of three. Virginia took two of three here, and Huron took two of three in Huron, and the club is 5-10 since the peak and 56-49 this morning. Third in the Sapphire, 16 games behind Somerville, which settled the division some time ago, and a game behind Boston for second. Sixth in the Ice Conference, four games clear of Denver and the last playoff spot.

So it is in. It is very probably going to be in. That was never the question with this club, and eight Octobers have taught everybody here to stop treating it like one.

The pitching has done its part and then some. The staff's 3.65 earned run average is eighth-best in the league, its WHIP fourth. In May I told you Roy Bell had been available for less than half the season and that the calendar was the only thing standing between him and the top of this rotation. The calendar has since cleared. He has made 15 starts, 2.60 earned run average, 97 strikeouts and 13 walks in 97 innings, and he has been the best starter on the staff. Sam Kutka is at 3.03. Johnny Cunnane has 30 saves, second in the league. The bullpen's 3.25 is eighth-best.

Steve Westbrook is not part of that paragraph. He was 2-6 with a 4.25 in May. He has gone 3-6 since and sits at 5-12, 4.90, with 21 home runs allowed, and he is owed $31.6 million a year through 2034. Westbrook and Bell were both on this club's trade block in the spring. One of them has turned out to be the reason the rotation works.

What has not done its part is the lineup, and it has not been close. The Blue Crabs are 23rd in runs and 24th in on-base percentage, three spots worse than in May. Fabio Cardia is hitting .332 with 16 home runs on the league minimum and is the best hitter on the roster by a distance. Behind him: Matt Lamberson at .221, Joe Suchan at .206, Danny Gaona at .229. Victor Barboza came back from seven weeks on the injured list and has 10 home runs and a .219 average. Jorge Soto, who was hitting .277 with 11 home runs, has not played since June 6 and will not play again this season.

The front office has noticed. This week the club went looking, in public, for a slugging first baseman and a second baseman who can hit .250. The first request is Soto's absence spelled out. The second is Justin Clay, who is hitting .236 with a .270 on-base percentage and has started 104 of the 105 games at second.

Which makes this a buyer, and I want to be careful about what kind.

I have never written the column that tells Steve to trade the farm for a ring, and the farm keeps making it harder to write. Whatever else you say about Steve, he knows how to grow ballplayers. Baltimore's minor-league clubs had the best combined record in the league in 2026, 2028, 2030 and 2031, and were third in the two years between. This year they are 271-133 and first again. Laurel is 65-16. Arnold is 61-32. Severna Park leads its division. The complaint in this city has never been the pipeline. It has been what comes out the other end in October. In May I told you Alex Mojica was a phone call from Baltimore, hitting .276 at Severna Park. He hit .298 with 15 home runs there before the call came on July 19, and he has caught nine games since. DSA Reports ranked him 31st among the league's prospects in its list dated that same day. Howard Dupuis, who had 32 strikeouts at Laurel when I last wrote about him, has since climbed through Arnold to Severna Park and has a 2.20 earned run average in five starts there. Matt Locher is closing for Severna Park and has 22 saves.

The name I would keep an eye on at this deadline is Rick D'Amore. He is a second baseman, he is hitting .310 with a .437 on-base percentage at Arnold, and he is 33rd on the league's own list of its top 100 prospects and 26th on DSA's. The club is shopping for a second baseman who can hit .250. It may already have one, two levels down, and the question for Steve is whether he trades for this year's version or waits for next year's.

My guess is that he buys small. A first baseman on an expiring deal, somebody to stand at second until D'Amore is ready, and nothing that costs Laurel or Arnold anybody who matters. That is what a club does when it knows it is going to the postseason and knows, from eight trips, that getting there has never been the hard part.

Fifty-seven games left. Thirty-nine of them are inside the division, and the last six are Toronto and New York, which is as soft a finish as the schedule could hand anybody. Somerville comes to Baltimore once more, September 13 to 15. By then the standings will have decided almost everything. The only thing those three games can tell anybody is whether 1-8 is a record or a habit, and this city will be watching them for exactly that reason.
