HURON DAILY BEACON

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Herons land Smith, then drop six straight

BY **LORRAINE PETROSKY** · HURON DAILY BEACON

Jimmy Smith became a Heron on July 19. The next day Jesse Gallis came off the mound against Toronto with an elbow that needs reconstruction, and he will not throw another pitch for about 13 months. The club gained a starter and lost a reliever inside 24 hours, and if you had asked me in April which of those two things would happen first, I would have told you they would arrive together. They usually do.

Smith's first start was July 24 in New York. He gave up three runs in seven innings, did not figure in the decision, and the Herons lost 5-4. That was the second of six straight losses, three in New York and three in Somerville, the longest losing streak this club has had all year. He won his next start, 8-2 over Baltimore on July 30, and that ended it.

Here is where that leaves the ledger. Fifty-five and 50, fifth in the Topaz, eight games behind Kansas City. Seventh in the Fire Conference. San Juan is one game behind in eighth, and Oahu three behind in ninth, the first club on the outside.

I wrote in May that 28-20 meant the club would probably be there in October. It is still true, by three games over the first club on the outside, which is a smaller margin than I had in mind. The high point came on June 10 at 38-25. The Herons have gone 17-25 since.

Daniel was asked in July whether a division this crowded was something a club wins or something it survives. He did not hedge.

> *"We still believe that we can win the division," he said. "It's gonna be a close race till the very end but I believe that we can finish at the top."*

On July 19 he sent Montreal a 2034 first-round pick, a 2033 third, a 2034 third and David Amejorado, a 23-year-old infielder he had named in that same answer as one of the young players who would get a chance with Dan Boyd and Danny Perez hurt. Smith had a 2.02 earned run average across 15 starts in Montreal. Afterward, on the league's message board, Daniel put the price plainly: "I didnt wanna pay that much but the pitching market for solid SP's is weak."

The rotation explains why he paid it. Nick Agins has been better than he was in May, 8-4 with a 3.02 and 136 strikeouts in 21 starts. This week the club made sure he stays: a five-year extension worth $151 million, beginning next season. Behind him the numbers run 4.60, 5.02, 5.11 and 5.20. The starters' earned run average is 17th in the league. Rocky Gerling, the third pick in the 2027 draft, is 4-8. A club with one reliable starter bought a second one, and the deadline has not closed.

The lineup has done its part. It is seventh in runs and has stolen 186 bases, 16 more than any other club, with three men past 30: Danny Perez 33, Garrett Roll and Yuji Kishi 32 apiece. Armando Ramirez has 23 home runs and so does Egidio Vercesi, who makes the league minimum. Justin Evans came up to play third with Boyd out and has hit .400 in 18 games. Boyd, hurt since early July, had a setback on July 29 and is three more weeks away.

Manny Pineda is at .216 with 12 home runs. He is six stolen bases from 300 for his career. I asked where he would bat in September.

> *"Year after year, Pineda has proved that he is an all-star-caliber player," Daniel said. He conceded the hitting was down, and said Pineda stays in the lineup, "towards the bottom," unless he regresses further.*

Then there are the splits. The Herons are 32-19 at home and 23-31 on the road. In May that split was 15-6 and 13-14, and I called it a gap wider than it usually runs. It has grown. They are 27-18 inside the Topaz and 28-32 against everyone else.

Fifty-seven games left, 30 of them at home, which is the one kind thing the schedule has done. Thirty-nine are inside the division: six apiece against Kansas City, Milwaukee, Oklahoma City and Virginia, the four clubs ahead of them; six against San Juan, the club one game behind; six against Memphis, which is 36-69; and three against Southland.

Now a coincidence, because I cannot leave one alone. There are two Matt Rays in this organization. Both are 22, and Huron drafted both of them in 2027, one in the 17th round and one in the 21st. The one from the 21st plays first base here, and Daniel named him in July too; he is hitting .272 in 60 games. The one from the 17th is a left fielder at Lansing, and DSA Reports, in its list dated July 19, has him 96th among the league's

prospects. Its list has Justin Evans 61st and Joe Hughes, a starter who has pitched at three levels this summer, 72nd. The league's own top 100 has no Herons on it at all.

That is an odd thing to say about a system whose clubs had a top-eight combined record in the league every year from 2025 to 2030. They have been 10th for two seasons now. Manitoba is 58-23.

The last championship in this town went to the 2020 club, which won 84 games and was the last one into the field. I have said for years that October keeps its own books. The books are only opened for the clubs in the room, and Huron is three games from the door.