

LA PRESSE SPORTIVE

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Machine holds playoff spot, sells anyway

BY **ÉTIENNE CHARBONNEAU** · LA PRESSE SPORTIVE

On May 8 Sam Kelly made his seventh start of the season, left the mound with a 1.50 earned run average, and has not thrown a pitch since. That was 12 weeks ago. The injury report says he is about nine days from returning. In this city we have learned to believe a return date only after it happens. If he does come back, he comes back to a club that is, as of this morning, in the playoffs.

Not by much. Montreal is 53-52, fourth in the Sapphire, 19 games behind Somerville, and seventh in the Ice Conference, one game ahead of Denver and two ahead of Fort Collins. In May the club was 26-22 and I spent a column circling the word "good" without landing on it. Since then it is 27-30. There were seven straight wins in June, from the 6th to the 13th. They came to 15-11 for the month, and then July was 10-13.

The pitching I called the best in the league in May is no longer first in anything, and is still very good. Sixth in earned run average, third in WHIP, second-fewest walks. The bullpen is fourth. Dave Roughton has a 1.98 and Steve Caron a 1.94, and Dave Santillan, who was 24 years old with 12 saves when I last wrote, is 24 years old with 21. T.J. Larson came back on July 20 and has made three starts.

And then, on July 19, the front office sold the best of it.

Jimmy Smith had a 2.02 earned run average across 15 starts, the finest work anybody in this rotation had done with Kelly gone. He went to Huron for a 2034 first-round pick, two third-rounders and a 23-year-old shortstop named David Amejorado. Jon Romero, the 36-year-old reliever, went to Denver the same week for a ninth-round pick, with half his salary staying here. And on the league's want list, where general managers say plainly what they will not say to a newspaper, Josh wrote: "All rentals are available for trade. Looking for prospects/picks."

The rentals are Matt Jacobs, the 36-year-old first baseman signed in June, and Kaden Allen, who is hitting .261 in a part-time role on a one-year deal. Both are on the trade block, along with Renault Pasolini

and most of the bullpen's older arms.

I have been asked, by readers who have waited twenty years for October and have now had two of them, whether this is a surrender. I do not think it is, and I think the answer is below the big club, where it has been for a long time.

The Montreal affiliates have had a top-four combined record in the league in every season from 2025 through 2031. They led the league in 2029. They are fifth this year. The league's own list of its top 100 prospects has four of them on it, all pitchers: Chris Shere 23rd, Oscar Lopez 28th, Jorge Arbizu 43rd and David Bustamante 55th. Shere is the 23-year-old I described in May as carrying a 7.64 earned run average with 34 strikeouts in 35 innings, a line that could mean one of two things. It is 7.11 now, with 57 strikeouts in 63 innings at Sherbrooke, and both lists, the league's and DSA Reports' dated July 19, have independently put him 23rd. Oscar Lopez is 17. When I last wrote, his club had not opened its season. It has, and he has a 2.79.

A front office with that many arms coming does not need three more months of Jimmy Smith. It wants the first-round pick. I understand the arithmetic. I do not have to enjoy it on a morning when the club is holding a playoff place by one game.

The hitting has not changed its nature. The team is 29th in batting average and 23rd in on-base percentage, and it has 133 home runs, 10th. Gabe Rocke is at .175. Yuigo Sakaguchi, at .261 with 16 home runs and 63 runs batted in, is the steadiest man in the order, as he was in May.

And Dean Salvucci is hitting .183.

In May he was at .193 with 20 home runs, leading the league, and I wrote that the season would end either with 50 home runs and an argument in every bar on Saint-Laurent, or in the middle of July, when the thing holding it up quietly stopped. It is August. Nothing has stopped. He has 33 home runs, one behind Jared Mettler for the league lead, 68 runs batted in and a .316 on-base percentage, because he walks, and fewer than one hit in every five at-bats. At this pace he finishes with about 50. The argument in the bars has already started. I have been told about it on Saint-Laurent, at some length.

I asked Josh in July whether Salvucci was a player to build around or to sell high. The trade block is its own kind of answer: Salvucci is not on it. He is signed through 2034.

Fifty-seven games remain, 30 of them here. Thirty-nine are inside the Sapphire, six apiece against Somerville, Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Chicago and New York.

For two decades I wrote about a thing that was not there. Then for two seasons I wrote, a little late each time, about a team that was. Now there is a team that is in the playoffs this morning and has decided not to spend on staying there, and I find I do not have a register for that one either. I am told that is what September is for.