TIMES-CRESCENT

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Mudcats sweep Gremlins, then drop 10 straight

BY **THÉO DELACROIX** · TIMES-CRESCENT

Coming out of the All-Star break the Mudcats went to Galveston, then the second-best team in the Ice Conference, and won three games in three nights, 6-1 and 4-2 and 9-6, and for a long weekend in July it sounded like the old band had found the old tempo. Then they went to Big Horn and lost three, and came home and lost three to Phoenix and three to Oahu, and went to Vancouver and lost again.

Ten straight. The longest losing streak of the season.

It ended on July 31 in Vancouver, 7-6, and the next night they lost 10-4. They are 1-9 in their last 10 games, 42-63, seventh in the Jade, 24 games behind Cincinnati and 10 behind the last playoff place in the Ice Conference. The low point of the season came on July 30, at 41-62.

In May I wrote about the rhythm of this team losing the beat in the same bar, 15 one-run losses out of 25, and I said it was the sound of a tired team rather than a bad one. I am less sure of that now. The Mudcats are 13-21 in one-run games now. Since my May piece they are 3-6 in them, which is closer to ordinary luck, and the record since then is 22-35 anyway. When the close games even out and the record does not, the close games were never the whole story.

The rotation was the most-worked in baseball in May. It still leads the league in innings, 604 of them, and its earned run average is 26th. Joe Barnes, who was magnificent then and 2-4 for it, has been magnificent since: a 3.09 earned run average over 16 starts, 129 strikeouts and six home runs allowed in 99 innings. He went on the injured list on June 25 and has not been back. He is in the last year of a contract that pays him $26.5 million this season, which in a different July would have made him the most talked-about arm in the league.

Bill Dixon is 24 and has thrown 133 2/3 innings at 4.11, the most on the staff. Nate Trout, who was 23 and at 6.10 in May, is 23 and at 5.85. David Mills is 4-11. The bullpen is 28th.

And yet there is music in this lineup, and it is coming from two young men.

Andy Chenault is hitting .326 with 17 home runs and a .565 slugging percentage, and he took a player of the week award on July 26, in the middle of the losing streak, which is the kind of thing that happens to a good player on a bad team. He is signed through 2035. Mark Williams, who was hitting .277 in May, is 25 and hitting .275 with 19 home runs and a .369 on-base percentage, on the league minimum. I asked Ryan in July whether this was the start of the next New Orleans core. I will answer it myself, carefully: it is two men, and a core is more than two. It is a good two.

The men signed to hold the old core together have held what they could. Vinny Aguilar, who was at .180 in 18 games in May, has 15 home runs. Will Shore has 26 stolen bases. Travis Williams is hitting .213.

Eric McReynolds is 35 now. He is hitting .176 in 64 games, in the last year of his contract, in his 18th season in this organization. He was on the 2017 team. Whether there is a 19th can wait until spring.

The deadline closes with the next sim. The front office has made no trades this season and has posted nothing on the league's trade board. A club 10 games out in August with a $26.5 million pitcher in the last year of his deal would normally be the first phone call every contender makes. This one's pitcher is on the injured list. The rest of the expiring money, Aguilar, Travis Williams and McReynolds, is not money a contender pays for.

So the honest answer to the question I asked Ryan, whether a club this far out in July sells, is that this one may not have much to sell.

What it has is below. The league's own list of its top 100 prospects has three Mudcats on it: Alejandro Vargas 21st, Adam Elliott 39th and Adam Marek, the 21-year-old reliever I wrote about striking out 15 men in 10 innings at Gulfport, 50th. DSA Reports, in its list dated July 19, is kinder still. It has five New Orleans players in its top 100: Vargas 18th, Dave McCloy 50th, Jose Ramirez 52nd, Matt Kulp 55th and Felipe Rodriquez 93rd. Vargas is still hitting .222 at Baton Rouge, as he was hitting .220 in May, and both lists still think he is the best young player in the organization. Kevin Zaragoza, the 17-year-old who had not thrown a pitch when I last wrote, has been sent to Lake Charles.

The affiliates are 15th in the league in combined record. They were ninth or better in four of the seven years before this one.

Fifty-seven games remain, 30 of them at home, 39 of them inside the Jade.

There is a passage near the end of any long song where the melody drops out and only the rhythm section is left, and you can tell, if you have heard enough of them, whether the song is ending or only

changing key. I have heard this one since 2013. I am not ready to say which it is. The record is.