THE OKLAHOMAN SPORTS DESK

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Outlaws feast on sub-.500 clubs, falter against winners

BY **MARGUERITE YOO** · THE OKLAHOMAN SPORTS DESK

Split the Outlaws' schedule by the quality of the opponent and the season separates into two teams.

Against clubs with a losing record this morning, Oklahoma City is 40-10. That is an .800 team. Against clubs with a winning record, it is 21-34. That is a .382 team. The first number is the reason the club is 61-44, third in the Topaz, two games behind Kansas City, level with Milwaukee and at its best record of the season after four straight wins. The second number is the one this franchise has been living inside for 22 Octobers.

In May I told you to watch the road record. The Outlaws were 8-13 away from home then and I said that if the split held through July it would stop being noise. It did not hold. They are 17-13 on the road since. The overall split, 36-18 at home and 25-26 away, is still wide, but the part of it that looked like a pattern has been diluted by 30 games of ordinary baseball. I built a paragraph on it and it was mostly sample size.

The opponent split is a different kind of number, and I have checked it the same way. Before May 24 the Outlaws were 11-17 against today's winning clubs. Since then they are 10-17. It has not moved. Against the rest they have gone from 16-4 to 24-6. The record has improved entirely against the clubs that will not be in the field.

That matters in this particular place for an obvious reason. A postseason is nothing but games against winning teams.

The case for the other side is the same one I made in May, and it has grown stronger. This staff gives nothing away. It has allowed 92 home runs, the fewest in the league, and walked 279 batters, the third-fewest. Its WHIP is fifth-best and its bullpen's earned run average, 3.03, is second-best. Those are the

characteristics that have most reliably separated the clubs that go deep in October from the clubs that go home, and I still believe that.

Brian Lee is 11-3 with a 2.15 earned run average and 148 strikeouts, tied for sixth in the league, across 22 starts. He is 26. Shane Drew, 34, has 29 saves, tied for third, with a 1.33 earned run average and a 0.82 WHIP. Alex Cardenas, the one-year signing, is 10-5 with a 3.46. The back of the rotation is where it loosens: Jonathan Cooper is at 4.79 and Alex Garcia at 5.42.

Jeremy Porten is hitting .327 with a .430 on-base percentage, a .633 slugging percentage and 30 home runs, tied for third in the league. He was the most valuable asset in this organization in May and the distance has grown. He is signed through 2036, at $7.2 million this year and $36 million a year from 2034.

After Porten the lineup is what it was. Ted Ketron, the three-year, $55 million signing, has 18 home runs and a .292 on-base percentage. Manny Jimenez, at $22 million this year and signed through 2034, is hitting .229 with 65 runs batted in. The team is 12th in runs.

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 or its want list. The payroll is $179.1 million, sixth in the league.

I asked Rees in July whether, as it stands, this was the roster that gets this club to a final. I will give my own answer, since the chart is in front of me. The roster beats the teams it should beat at a rate almost nobody in this league matches. What it has not done this season is beat the teams it will have to beat. One more arm at the back of the rotation would not change a 21-34 record by itself. It would change who starts Game 4.

Below the big club, the system is modest. The league's own list of its top 100 prospects has one Outlaw on it: Mark Barnes, the center fielder taken in the first round this spring, 62nd, who is hitting .229 at Wellington. DSA Reports, in its list dated July 19, has Felix Rosario 82nd, Tom Guier 83rd, Lee Hughes 92nd and Barnes 100th. It should be said that DSA is run by Rees himself, which he announced to the league this spring, and readers can weigh that as they like. Rosario, the arm I singled out in May with a 2.17 at Cobourg, has come back to a 4.33 there across 95 innings. Guier, a 23-year-old catcher, has 10 home runs at Cobourg and a promotion to Belleville. At Belleville, Brad Hilger, whom I called in May likelier than any of the system's hitters to stand on this mound, is 11-2 with a 4.02 across 22 starts.

The affiliates are 11th in combined record this year, after finishing between 15th and 26th in each of the three seasons before it.

Fifty-seven games remain, 27 at home. Thirty-nine are inside the Topaz, six apiece against Kansas City, Virginia, Huron and San Juan, and three against Milwaukee.

Twenty-two postseason appearances, four conference championship series, no finals. I have spent years looking for the variable. This year I did not need a model to find one. It is 21-34, and it is sitting in plain sight.