ROCHESTER POST-EXPRESS

AUGUST 2, 2032 · THE ROCHESTER NORTH STARS BEAT

North Stars win nine straight, still 5-20 in one-run games

BY **ADA BRIGHTBILL** · ROCHESTER POST-EXPRESS

On June 14 the North Stars were 31-36, five games under .500. It was the lowest point of Keven's first season in the chair, and it was the morning people in this city started asking whether the dynasty had ended with the man who built it.

They have gone 29-9 since.

They are 60-45 this morning, third in the Jade, six games behind Cincinnati, fourth in the Ice Conference and eight games clear of the last playoff spot. They have won nine straight: three at home against Oahu, three against Spokane, and three in Mexico City, two of those in extra innings. July was 17-6, the best month this club has had all year.

In May I wrote that the entire gap between this team's record and its run differential sat in one line of the ledger, a 1-9 mark in one-run games, and that it would correct. I was right that the club would climb. I was wrong about the line. The North Stars are 5-20 in one-run games. Since my May piece they are 4-11 in them, and 33-9 in everything else.

That is not a typo, and it is worth sitting with. This club has outscored its opponents by 144 runs, second-most in the league. It leads the league in runs, batting average, on-base percentage, slugging and OPS, all five. It does not lose close games because it plays so few of them that it can afford to lose nearly all of those.

Jeff Williams leads the league with 81 runs batted in. He is hitting .335 with 25 home runs, and he is 24 years old and paid $500,000. I wrote in May that he arrived in a trade in August 2027 at 19; that trade looks better every week. Lyle Egner is at .307. Tim Liddick, the catcher, is at .301. Jorge Garcia has 15 home runs and took a player of the week award on June 28, and Williams took one on July 12.

The rotation has been as good as the lineup. Its earned run average of 3.44 is third in the league. Joey Reek, the Pitcher of the Year winner, is 8-4 with a 2.33 and has allowed four home runs in 127 2/3 innings. Mark Christensen, in the final year of his deal, with Cincinnati paying half of it, has a 3.21.

The bullpen is the one thing that is not. It is 19th in the league, and those 20 one-run losses are its signature.

Keven was asked in May what he would do about it.

> *"We're desperately looking for bullpen upgrades but options are scarce," he said.*

He was asked again in July, and I will give his whole answer, because every answer from him goes in the file.

> *"Hi Ada, the offense is definitely just making up for it but we have some moves in the works we are working on. I expected both Williams and Reeks to be great, it's apart of why I came to Rochester. There's plenty of talent on this team."*

Those moves have not arrived yet. Rochester has not made a trade since it got Steve Gillis from Chicago in April. On the league's want list it has asked for above-average relievers and said it would trade a first-round pick for a bullpen ace. Gillis has 18 saves and a 2.80, and not much in front of him. Whether a reliever or two would fix a 5-20 record in one-run games I cannot tell you. The deadline closes with the next sim, and this is a club that knows exactly what is wrong with it.

What it could not spend, because it does not have it, is prospects. I wrote in May that the farm system was gone. Keven said the same thing in his own words before I did: "Our farm is awful and a good farm system leads to continued success." The affiliates are 31st in the league in combined record, after finishing 30th last season. The league's own list of its top 100 prospects has no North Stars on it at all. DSA Reports, in its list dated July 19, has one in its top 100: Ian Nelson, an 18-year-old designated hitter at Portland, 87th, who is hitting .363 with six home runs in his first 26 games. Melvin Aguirre, whom I called the best arm the organization still owned in May, has a 5.61 across 20 starts at Los Angeles.

That is the thinnest this system has been since 2019, when it was losing 117 games in Winston-Salem and nobody in Rochester had heard of any of it. The difference is that in 2019 the big-league club was the thing being rebuilt. Now the big-league club is winning nine straight and the system underneath it is the thing that needs building, and a first-year general manager cannot do both in the same August.

Fifty-seven games remain, 27 of them at home. Thirty-nine are inside the Jade, six against Cincinnati, six against Galveston, the two clubs ahead of it.

Six games is a real deficit with 57 to play. Nine straight wins is a real streak. And somewhere in the next six weeks this club is going to play another one-run game, and the same bullpen will be asked to hold it.