RICHMOND DISPATCH-LEDGER

AUGUST 2, 2032 · THE VIRGINIA REBELS BEAT

Rebels go 37-20 without Church; new starters yet to pitch

BY **BO THREADGILL** · RICHMOND DISPATCH-LEDGER

The last time Phil Church pitched was the 25th of May, in Myrtle Beach, four innings in a game the Rebels won to finish a sweep. The day before, I had written that there had not been an arm like his in this rotation since the 2025 club. He has not thrown a pitch since. He is on the 60-day injured list and is not due back before the season ends.

It would have been easy, that week, to write this season off a second time. The one front-line starter was gone, the lineup could not drive the ball, and the record was even.

They have gone 37-20 since.

Nineteen and seven in June. Seven straight wins from June 26 to July 3. Eleven and four since the All-Star break, and a sweep of New York to close the week in which the Empire scored four runs in three games. Virginia is 60-45, 15 over, the best mark of its season, three games behind Kansas City in the Topaz. It is tied with Big Horn for fourth in the Fire Conference and six games clear of San Juan, which holds the eighth and last playoff place.

The lineup is the part I got wrong in May, or at least the part I did not wait long enough on. It had scored 207 runs then, 22nd of 32. It has 508 now, third in baseball. It is still 25th in home runs and still strikes out less than anybody but one club, and the contact that was going nowhere in May is going somewhere now.

Chris Schmotzer is hitting .300 with a .391 on-base percentage and has scored 69 runs, seventh in the league. Chris Wilson is back from the injured list and hitting .295. Jesus Sifuentes, who was at .215 when I last wrote, is at .268 with 16 home runs. I asked Kaden in July whether Schmotzer was the spark he had been waiting for.

> *"Schmotzer has performed better than we had hoped, he's showing off why we hit him leadoff every game," he said. "Now we got Wilson coming off the IL to support him, the Chris duo should give teams some fits with the bats. Sifuentes, Powell, and Takami also had awesome Junes, the bats are sparking at a great time for our push."*

And the bullpen, which was the best thing about this club in May, has not given back an inch. Zeke Tovar has 19 saves, a 2.19 earned run average, 101 strikeouts in 78 innings and a 0.82 WHIP. He took the job when Curt Graham went down.

> *"Tovar has stepped into the closer role admirably with Curt Graham down," Kaden said. "I couldn't ask for more of him than what he's putting out there every time he's called on. This bullpen runs deep, it's ready for the divisional push. I'm confident in my guys."*

It does run deep. The relievers have a 3.22 earned run average, fifth in the league. John Gulbrandson has a 2.05 across 61 1/3 innings with 10 holds. Graham and Jacob Hickenbottom are both still on the 60-day list, and that is still $33 million standing in a training room.

The rotation is the other story. Without Church the starters have a 4.65 earned run average, 24th. Mike Dibrell has made 25 starts and has a 3.97. Albin Giolitti has a 5.21. Nick Showalter has walked 48 men in 79 2/3 innings. Dave Saulnier and Ralph McConnell are both hurt.

So on the league's trade board, Kaden posted what he wanted in plain language: he would "pay handsomely with some draft capital for some starting pitching." Huron's general manager answered on the same board that he would outbid Kaden for any good starter out there. It was that kind of summer in the Topaz.

On July 19 Virginia went and got two. From Southland it took Jon O'Rourke, 33, and Barry Richards, 36. Southland kept half of each man's salary and sent $1.5 million along with them. Virginia gave up two minor leaguers, Aaron Mundt, a 20-year-old first baseman, and Andrew Mines, a 22-year-old third baseman. For Southland, O'Rourke had a 5.87 earned run average, with 56 strikeouts and eight walks in 46 innings. Richards had a 5.81.

Neither has thrown a pitch for the Rebels. Two weeks later both are designated for assignment, and in those two weeks the club went 9-3 without them.

Kaden offered draft picks and paid in minor leaguers instead, and the one Rebel on the game's list of its top 100 prospects is still here. Dave Alfaro, a 20-year-old pitcher at Chattanooga, is 52nd. He was on the

trade block too. He has not moved.

Last season this club made no trades at all. This summer it has made one for pitching, and whatever the last 57 games bring, that one belongs to Kaden. Two minor leaguers went out. Two starters came in, and neither has been used. That is not the ace this rotation lost in May, and it is not yet anything else either.

The farm those two prospects came from is 29th in the league in combined record and has finished between 27th and 31st every season since 2025. Shenandoah is 18-63. Lynchburg is 24-57. The names are there anyway. DSA Reports, in its list dated July 19, has Jameson Towne 70th, and he is already at Double-A Johnson City two months after the draft, with five home runs. Dave Shahan, who I called the best young hitter in the organization, is hitting .290 with seven home runs at Lynchburg. Travis McLaughlin, who in May had not played a game that counts, is hitting .325 with five home runs in 24 games at Chattanooga. Jonathan Sawyer, the Peninsula first baseman I told you in May was the best of the three hitters there, is hurt and will not play again this season.

Fifty-seven games left, 27 at home. And here is the part of the calendar to hold on to.

This club is 43-17 against everyone outside its division. Inside the Topaz it is 17-28. Thirty-nine of the last 57 are inside the Topaz, six apiece against Milwaukee and Oklahoma City, three against Kansas City. The other 18 are against the Ice Conference, where Virginia is 19-9. There is not a single game left against the rest of the Fire, where it is 24-8.

In May I told you the winning had come against clubs that do not play here often. The schedule has run out of those. What is left is the division that has beaten this team 28 times, a rotation still waiting on its help, a closer with 101 strikeouts, and a season that has already refused to end once.