BALTIMORE LEDGER-STAR

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Crabs finally sweep Moneyline, surge into October

BY **ROSALIND FEENEY** · BALTIMORE LEDGER-STAR

In August I wrote that the three games against Somerville in September could tell this town only one thing, whether 1-8 was a record or a habit. On September 13, 14 and 15, in Baltimore, the Blue Crabs beat the Moneyline three straight. So it was a record. The season series finished 4-8, still a losing record, and nobody is putting it on a T-shirt. But it is not a habit any more.

The sweep was the end of something larger. On the morning of August 2 this club was 56-49, 5-10 since July 11, and I wrote that it had not won a series in that time. It won ten straight from August 1 to August 11. It went 21-6 in August. From deadline day to the last day of the season it was 38-19, tied for the second-best record in baseball over those two months, and 13-5 against clubs that are still playing. It finished 94-68, second in the Sapphire, and it has home field in the first round.

I want to spend some time on how, because it was not the way I said it would be.

I said in August that Steve would buy small at the deadline: a first baseman on an expiring deal, somebody to stand at second base until Rick D'Amore was ready. He bought nothing. Not a first baseman, not a second baseman, not a reliever. D'Amore is still at Arnold, now 28th among the league's top 100 prospects, and Howard Dupuis, the arm I told you about in August, finished the year at Severna Park, 7-1 with a 2.77 earned run average in 13 starts. Nobody from Laurel or Arnold was sold for two months of anything. The roster that went 5-10 after July 11 is, give or take a call-up, the roster that went 38-19 after August 2, and I did not see that coming.

What changed first was the lineup, which in August I called the part of this club that had not done its part. It was 23rd in runs that morning. It finished 12th. Since the deadline, with a runner on second or third, the Blue Crabs hit .274 and slugged .494, fifth-best in baseball over that stretch, and those two numbers are

the difference between the club I wrote about in August and this one. David Peck hit .306 with 44 runs batted in after the deadline, and for the season he hit .329 with men in scoring position. Matt Lamberson, who was at .221 when I last wrote, hit .267 with a .366 on-base percentage after it. He also hit the hardest ball anybody on this club hit all season, 122.4 miles an hour on September 5, and it was caught.

Then there is Steve Westbrook, and I owe him a paragraph. In August I wrote that he was not part of the paragraph about the rotation working. He was 5-12 with a 4.90 and 21 home runs allowed, on $31.6 million a year through 2034. In 12 starts after the deadline he went 7-2 with a 3.05 earned run average, 66 strikeouts and 11 walks. He finished 12-14, 4.21, and he started two of the last six games of the season. I asked Steve in September whether Westbrook would start at all in October. Westbrook answered it himself.

He had help. Jake McHan had a 1.82 after the deadline and finished 15-6. Sam Kutka had a 1.71 and finished at 2.56. The staff's 3.49 earned run average was fourth-best in the league, and its WHIP of 1.15 was the best in baseball, by a hair over Somerville. Johnny Cunnane saved 41. The one hole is Roy Bell. He hurt his back on September 24 and the club expects him back in about a week, which would be the back end of this series if it goes long.

And on August 25 Antonio Razo, who had 177 plate appearances all season, doubled home two runs in the ninth to beat Boston 4-3. In 29 years on this club I have seen few seasons without one of those, and fewer Octobers that rewarded it.

Which brings us back to Rochester.

The North Stars finished 95-67, a game better than Baltimore, and open on the road anyway, as a wild card. Games 1 and 2 are here October 8 and 9. Games 3, 4 and 5 are in Rochester from the 11th, and Games 6 and 7 back here on the 15th and 16th. Baltimore won all four meetings this season, all of them in Rochester, from June 3 to 6. Two of them went to extra innings, one of them 18. The Blue Crabs allowed five runs in four games.

That would mean more if I had not been here for the last three Octobers between these clubs. Baltimore beat Rochester in the first round in 2024, four games to one. Rochester beat Baltimore in the 2027 semifinal, in the 2029 quarterfinal and in last year's quarterfinal, in seven. Rochester won the championship in two of those three years. It has gone through Baltimore on the way to a ring twice.

This franchise has played in one final, in 2013, as the Washington Generals. Nine postseasons in ten years since it came home, and not one trip back. That is still true this morning.

This is a good team. It was the second-best team in baseball for two months, and it beat the best one three straight in September when it had every reason to save its arms for October. It goes into the first round playing better than it has all year, which is not nothing, and is not a ring either.