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Dynamite sweep Fort Collins, sneak in at 82-80

BY **CAMILLE OSSORIO** · DENVER HERALD

On the night of October 3, Denver was 79-80 and Fort Collins was 81-78. The last three games of the season were in Fort Collins, against Fort Collins, for the eighth and last playoff spot in the Ice Conference. Denver needed all three.

Jonathan Miller threw 6 1/3 scoreless innings on October 4, Jared Pink and Matt Hoogerhyde hit solo home runs, and Denver won 2-0. Danny Kimball, a reliever Southland sent here in July, started the next night and held Fort Collins scoreless for 4 2/3; Tom Everette homered and drove in both runs, and Denver won 2-1. Marty Kilby went 5 1/3 on the final day, Kevin Porter homered, and Denver won 5-2. Bill Carstensen saved the first two. Simon Cardinal saved the third.

So the defending champion is in, 82-80, by one game. It is the club's 15th straight postseason. It is also the fewest wins any Denver playoff team has ever had, by nine. The previous low was 91.

Here is the deadline, graded. In August I wrote that the math said this club needed a starter more than it needed another reliever, and a bat only if Morgan Alison was not coming back. Watch which of those Jay goes after, I said. He went after the bat. On August 2 he sent a 2034 third-round pick to New Orleans for Jose Nolasco, 28, who hit .235 with 10 home runs and 31 runs batted in over 50 games here. Alison never came off the 60-day list.

I asked Jay at the deadline whether a starter was on his list. He said he would love to add one, that he had already used his over-budget trade, and that nothing on the market was compelling. "I would've loved to get Mike Taylor," he said, "but he wasn't willing to waive his no trade clause." Four days after the deadline, Taylor tore his rotator cuff pitching for Phoenix, and the injury ended his career. Jay did not get his starter. He also did not get that.

The right deal, Jay said, would have been someone under team control. Nolasco is under team control. He is owed $25 million next year.

> *"Next year's budget is a problem for future me," Jay said, "not desperately-trying-to-make-the-playoffs-this-year me." He'll play left field or designated hitter in 2033, Jay said, "safely stashed on the bench against lefties." The payroll finished at $256.8 million, the largest in the league and more than $50 million clear of the next club. That is what a bat costs when it is the only thing you can still afford to add.*

The starter came from inside the building. Kimball made 10 starts after the deadline with a 3.33 earned run average. Malik Harris, the other reliever who came over in June, made nine at 5.25. The rotation finished 19th in the league at 4.34. That was the hole in August and it is the hole this morning.

The bullpen is the other one. Steve Kuznicki's career ended on August 1. Denver blew 29 saves, the most in baseball. I asked Jay who would close the six games against Fort Collins. "Steve who?" he said. "I'm expecting to win most games 11-2 and thus not do need a closer." He won the last three 2-0, 2-1 and 5-2. Carstensen, with a 1.86 since the deadline and five saves, is the answer he did not give me.

The lineup did what it does. Denver hit 245 home runs, the most in baseball, and slugged .428, second. Everette hit .318 with 23 home runs. Hyun-kyu Kim hit 34. Pink, at catcher and on the league minimum, hit 30. What it did not do is hit late. Since the deadline, in the seventh inning or later of a close game, Denver hit .184 with a .257 on-base percentage. It is the number I would most like to see change next week.

Now Somerville.

The series opens there October 8 and 9, comes here for Games 3, 4 and 5 from the 11th, and goes back east for 6 and 7 if needed. Somerville finished 106-56, 24 games better than Denver, and won all four meetings this year. It will play the series without Antonio Reyna, out with his back, and Chase Posey, out with a fractured rib.

These two clubs have met seven times in October. Denver has won five of them: 2010, 2012, 2024, 2025 and 2029, the last a four-game sweep. Somerville won in 2020 and 2030. None of that pitches Game 1. Neither does an 82-80 record, or a 106-56 one. Jay has six rings and a habit of finding out after the fact which of his moves worked. This time he will know by the 16th.