NORTHERN COLORADO SUN

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Roosters drop final six, miss October by one game

BY **DALE KIRKPATRICK** · NORTHERN COLORADO SUN

On the night of September 29 the Roosters beat Las Vegas 4-3 at home and stood at 81-75, three games ahead of Denver for the eighth and last playoff place in the Ice Conference, with six games left.

They did not win again. In Tampa Bay they lost 1-0, 9-3 and 2-0. Then Denver came here and won 2-0, 2-1 and 5-2. Fort Collins scored six runs in those six games and was shut out three times. It finished 81-81, one game behind Denver.

The mechanism is the one I have been describing since May, and the last week is only its most concentrated form. In May this lineup scored by reaching base. By August the on-base percentage had fallen to 20th and the runs had followed. It finished the season 28th in runs, 31st in home runs, 32nd in stolen bases and 30th in slugging. A lineup built that way needs everything to go right to score three runs, and it was asked to score three runs against a club that needed to win all three.

I asked Tim in September where the runs would come from. The six games are the answer the season gave.

What makes the week hard to sit with is that the rest of the club did its part. After the deadline the Roosters went 30-27 and won 12 of 16 one-run games. The staff allowed the second-fewest home runs in baseball, tied with Mexico City, and the bullpen finished sixth in earned run average. Jesse Beck had a 2.13 earned run average after the deadline and struck out 86 in 63 1/3 innings. Brian Holder finished the year at 1.33 across 70 appearances, second-best in the league among pitchers with 40 innings or more, with 23 holds. Bill Barker saved 34.

In August I asked Tim whether he would take a call about Beck, whose deal was ending, and in September whether an offer was out to keep him. The offer went out and Beck took it: five more years beginning in 2033, $140 million in all, $28 million next season. Jose Alvarado is signed for five more years at $55 million. Arnáo Gomez, whom Tim called in July "a fixture at short," hit .315 after the deadline and is signed for three more years at $28.5 million. Jon McMillan and Tim Urbach have new three-year deals as well.

So the winter is not about the pitching. It is about the other half.

Chris Goers, the $25 million one-year signing at catcher, reached base at .359, the best among the regulars, and he is a free agent. So are Joe Harris, Colby Sims and Gustavo Lopez, three outfielders, and Javier Camarillo, the first baseman, and Roger Lippincott in the rotation. About $51 million comes off the books. About $119 million is already committed to next season, $28 million of it to Beck and $27 million to Andres Maldonado. What is left has to buy a lineup.

Tim told me in July that he planned to stay the course and keep building from within. That is a plan with real material behind it. Seven of the league's top 100 prospects, by the league's own list, belong to this organization. R.J. Blum is fifth. He made 28 starts at Salt Lake City this season, 137 2/3 innings with a 4.25 earned run average, and as I wrote in August, the innings matter more than the earned run average. Carlos Bueno is 21st, Leo Gatica 33rd, Cory Pineda 41st, David Santiago 44th, Jose Aguilar 60th and Chris Jackowski 97th. Six of those seven are pitchers or play the infield. Pineda is the outfielder, and the one this organization has been developing to play every day.

The difficulty is visible in that list. The pitching is coming in waves. The hitting the big-league club needs most is coming one man at a time.

The last time Fort Collins played a postseason game was 2019. In 13 trips it has never reached a final. This year it did not make the trip, by one game, and the six games that decided it were lost 1-0, 9-3, 2-0, 2-0, 2-1 and 5-2.