RÉCORD CIUDAD

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Luchadores miss Ruby by one; Rams win late head-to-heads

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One game. Mexico City finished 90-72 and Big Horn finished 91-71, and the Ruby went to Big Horn. The Luchadores won their last five games of the season. Big Horn won one of its last five, and that one, on October 4, was enough to clinch.

The season series between the clubs finished 6-6, which hides the order the games were played in. Mexico City won five of the first six, in April and May. It lost five of the last six. On August 30, in Big Horn, Arturo Rivera threw seven scoreless innings with 10 strikeouts, and the Luchadores lost 1-0 when Bill Raymond drew a walk with the bases loaded in the ninth. Big Horn won the next two games of that series by a combined 14-2. On September 25, here, the Luchadores lost 5-4 in the 10th. On September 26 they lost 3-2. A division decided by one game is decided everywhere, but those six are where I would start.

In August I wrote that this club had made no trades all season and that the injuries had changed the arithmetic. It made its first two on deadline day. Spokane sent Shane Romans for a 2033 sixth-round pick, and Boston sent Keith Palavandishvili and Matt Day for Tom Mandich. Both trades were for shortstops. Romans hit .176 with a .227 on-base percentage in 184 plate appearances. Palavandishvili was on the 60-day injured list when he arrived and has not played for this club. Lorenzo Valenzuela, 33, the shortstop already here, hit .218 for the season. I still do not have a defensive figure for him I trust enough to print. Day has a 3.44 earned run average in 18 1/3 innings.

The bullpen I described in August, the one that had carried the club in May and was coming back to the rest of the league, finished 16th in earned run average. Steve Parker saved 46 games, the most in baseball. Since the deadline he has a 5.34 earned run average and four blown saves in 26 appearances. Harry Smith had a 1.35 over the same stretch. John Shephard, who had a 0.95 earned run average in relief in May, was

moved into the rotation and made 11 starts after the deadline with a 6.65. Ed Waterman made the same move and had a 2.73.

Rivera is the reason this club is playing in October at all. He went 15-3 with a 2.24 earned run average and a 0.96 WHIP, at 35, in the first year of a four-year, $126.2 million contract, and after the deadline he had a 1.48 across 12 starts. In August I wrote that he had returned exactly what he was priced to return. He returned more.

The extra innings deserve a line, because they were the headline in August. The club was 0-5 then. It finished 4-9, and it won two of its last three: Egidio Marinelli singled home the winner in the 11th against Phoenix on September 22, and T.J. Slaughter drove in the winning run in the 10th against Myrtle Beach on October 3. Four games is not much to build on, in either direction.

The number worth building on is this one. Since August 2 the Luchadores went 30-12 against clubs that missed the postseason and 3-12 against clubs that made it. For the full season they were 24-35 against teams with winning records. This is the third straight year this club has reached October, and it reached this one by beating the teams it was supposed to beat.

The lineup's best numbers belong to the same men they did in May. Fernando Lopez hit 43 home runs, tied for third in the league, and drove in 113, third. He hit a single on April 4 at 125.8 miles an hour; only two balls all season left a bat harder, and both came off Big Horn bats. Ryan Metcalf hit 33 home runs on a contract that pays him less than $5 million a year through 2035, and with men on second or third he hit .304 and slugged .656. Jonathan Coon, 24 and on the league minimum, hit .298 with a .380 on-base percentage after the deadline.

The staff struck out fewer batters than any in the league, 1,240, and allowed the second-fewest home runs, tied with Fort Collins. That is the model I have described for 16 years: the ball goes in play, and the defense does the rest. It is still the model.

The correction I made in August about the farm holds. Kevin Clarke finished the year at Ciudad Juárez with 15 home runs. Bobby Kraemer, 22, joined him there and hit .232. Antonio Velazquez, 19, made 15 starts at Mexicali with 83 strikeouts and 42 walks, and the league ranks him 32nd among its top 100 prospects. Ian McIlree was promoted to this club and hit .184 in 189 plate appearances at catcher, his first time up.

The opponent is Oklahoma City.

The series opens here on October 8 and 9, though Oklahoma City won 95 games, five more than the Luchadores. Games 3, 4 and 5 are there from the 11th, and Games 6 and 7, if needed, come back here on the 15th and 16th. The Luchadores won three of four from Oklahoma City in May, here, and the clubs have not met since.

They have never met in October. Both of them were eliminated by Virginia last year, Mexico City in seven games in the conference championship series and Oklahoma City in the round before. Oklahoma City has been to the postseason 23 times without a championship. Mexico City has been five times, three of them in a row, without one.

I have picked this club to finish higher than it did in more than one preseason. The record against playoff teams since August was 3-12. The man starting the most important games has a 1.48 earned run average over the same stretch. Fifteen games is a small sample. So are 12 starts. The series is seven games, at most.
