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Chute walk-off caps 21-36 slide; Mobsters still get in

BY **DANNY KOLAR** · MILWAUKEE SENTINEL-PRESS

Brent Chute is 25, made $5 million this year, and on October 4 he hit a three-run home run in the bottom of the ninth to beat Southland 6-4. If you were looking for the moment this club decided it would rather not spend October on the couch, that was it. The next night the Mobsters beat Southland again, San Diego lost, and that was that. Milwaukee is in.

It is in at 82-80, tied with San Juan and Huron, which is a three-way tie for the last three seats on the bus. Nobody had to play a tiebreaker. Everybody had to sweat.

Here is how a team gets there from 61-44. On the morning of August 2 the Mobsters were tied for second in the Fire Conference. They went 21-36 the rest of the way. They lost seven straight from August 13 to 20. They went 10-17 in August and 9-16 in September. October, all six games of it, went 2-4, and two of those wins were the ones that counted.

In May they were 11-2 in one-run games and I called it a loan. In August they were 1-6 since July 5 and I said the loan got called. Since the deadline they went 5-17 in one-run games and 2-7 in extra innings, which is less a loan than a repossession. They finished the year 25-33 in one-run games. Ryan told me in May that the boys had the clutch gene. I would like to see the paperwork.

And yet. This lineup drew 598 walks this season, the most in baseball, and it reached base at .326, sixth. The trouble was the part after the walk. Since the deadline, with runners on second or third, the Mobsters hit .215, the worst in baseball, behind Tampa Bay by two ten-thousandths of a point. Tampa Bay lost 103 games. Chute was the exception all year: with men in scoring position he hit .318 and slugged .650, and he drove in 104, tied for seventh in the league. Trevor Faria, who reached base at .367 all season, hit a walk-off double

against San Juan on September 28 that mattered more than most people noticed at the time, since San Juan was one of the clubs Milwaukee had to finish level with.

The deadline. In August I asked Ryan whether the market had offered anything worth the price for an all-star infielder. "Unfortunately not," he said. "All the all-star caliber players we've sniffed around for were on 2+ year deals and we just can't take on a big contract going into next year." So he went shopping in the other aisle. He sent Bryan Sarro, a center fielder at Triple-A, to Montreal for Renault Pasolini, a second baseman. I wrote in August that Ryan would get his infielder, get him cheap, and nobody outside this state would notice. I was right about all three, and it did not help. Pasolini played 18 games, hit .267, and broke his kneecap running the bases on August 22. He will miss five to six months. Ryan also took Chris Holmes from New Orleans for Miguel Palafox, and Holmes put up a 2.36 earned run average in 10 relief outings, and bought Jason Fink from Galveston for a 10th-round pick. None of it touched the arm I told you about in August. Larry Leppert Jr. finished the year at Queen City with a 2.21 earned run average across 15 starts, and he is still a Mobster.

The pitching was not the problem. Alex Sanchez, the man this front office paid four draft picks for last winter, finished with a 3.06 earned run average over 197 1/3 innings and allowed 12 home runs all year. I asked Ryan in August who starts Game 1. "Sanchez obviously," he said. Obviously. Steve Summey went 9-1 again, if you count the way I do, and gave up two earned runs in 17 2/3 innings after the deadline. The staff finished ninth in earned run average.

What the staff does not have is a closer. Chris Calvert, $22 million and 35 years old, hurt his elbow on October 5 and is expected to miss six to seven weeks. Chris Grubb tore his elbow ligament in August. Jesus Espinosa, the best player on this roster when healthy, played 37 games and not one after May 11.

So. Virginia.

The series opens there October 8 and 9, comes here for Games 3, 4 and 5 from the 11th, and goes back to Virginia for 6 and 7 if it gets that far. Virginia won 100 games and went 40-17 after the deadline. Milwaukee went 21-36. Nobody in this clubhouse is going to argue with that, and neither am I.

Now the fine print. Milwaukee beat Virginia eight times in 12 tries this year and outscored them 53-36. In October these clubs have met four times, and Milwaukee won three: the 2011 first round, the 2013 quarterfinal in seven games on the way to a championship, and the 2026 first round. Virginia won in 2029.

In 2030 I spent most of September telling you this club was not good enough to win anything, and it won the whole thing. This team limped in. It limps in against a club it has beaten all year.