LA PRESSE SPORTIVE

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Machine sells Smith, then goes 19-8 into October

BY **ÉTIENNE CHARBONNEAU** · LA PRESSE SPORTIVE

The last time the Machine met Galveston in October was 2030, the autumn the drought ended, the first postseason this city had seen in 20 years. It lasted four games. I remember the weather better than the baseball, which is a habit of mine, and I remember that by the fourth night the people in the bars on Saint-Laurent had stopped asking whether we would win and had started asking whether this was what October was always like. It is not. I have been trying to tell them so for two years.

They will get the chance to find out again, because Montreal is in. Eighty-five and 77, fourth in the Sapphire, seventh in the Ice Conference, three games clear of the line, and in the postseason for a third straight year. In August I wrote that I did not have a register for a team that was in the playoffs and had decided not to spend on staying there. I am told the register was "winning." I was, as is now traditional, late to it.

Here is what happened. On July 19 the front office sent Jimmy Smith, the best starter it had left, to Huron for a 2034 first-round pick, two third-rounders and David Amejorado, and sent Jon Romero to Denver for a ninth-rounder. On deadline day it sent Renault Pasolini to Milwaukee for Bryan Sarro, a center fielder at Triple-A. Three trades, all of them away from the season. The reason was never hidden. The league's own list of its top 100 prospects has four Montreal pitchers on it this morning, led by Oscar Lopez, who is 18 and 16th, and Chris Shere, 22nd, the one I told you in May could mean one of two things. A front office with those arms coming will trade a good July for a first-round pick every time. And then the season went the other way. The Machine won eight straight from August 9 to August 17 and went 19-8 in August, the best month this club has had all year. On September 6 it stood 76-60, 16 over .500, and the line beneath it was too far away to see.

It was close enough to see by October. From that high mark the club went 9-17, and 1-5 in the last week. It arrived at the postseason the way one arrives at a station after the train has been held for you.

The pitching is why the train was held. The staff finished fifth in the league in earned run average and walked fewer batters than all but one club. Since the deadline, Jong-su Im has a 2.02 earned run average in 12 starts, and on September 18 in Somerville he threw eight scoreless innings and lost 2-1 on a single in the ninth. I have been watching that game, in one form or another, since 2011. John Kropp had a 2.67 after the deadline. T.J. Larson, who came back in July, threw eight scoreless innings at Oahu on August 13. The bullpen was third in the league. Chris Griffiths pitched 26 innings after the deadline with a 0.69 earned run average and did not lose a game. Dave Roughton finished at 1.72 over 78 2/3 innings. Dave Santillan saved 34, and I will only add that 13 of them came after the deadline, along with four blown.

Sam Kelly, whose absence opened my August column, came back. He made three starts. On August 28 he hurt his back, and on October 2 he had a setback. He finished 5-0 with a 2.01 earned run average in 10 starts, which is the cruelest line on this roster: a season that never quite happened, with nothing wrong in it.

And now Dean Salvucci, about whom I made a prediction in May and another in August. In May I wrote that his season would end either with 50 home runs and an argument in every bar on Saint-Laurent, or in the middle of July, when the thing holding it up quietly stopped. In August I said he was on pace for about 50. He finished with 44, second in the league, and a batting average of .178. He drew enough walks to reach base at .322 and stole 18 bases, and with runners on second or third he hit .140. Nothing stopped. It never quite started either. The argument in the bars has outlasted both of my predictions and I expect it to outlast me.

The hardest ball anybody on this club hit all year was his, 122.6 miles an hour, on June 7. It went over the fence. Of course it did.

Amejorado, the young infielder from the Smith trade, played second base nearly every day after the deadline and hit .271. Jimmy Smith, I am told, pitches for Huron now. I will let the Huron paper tell you how.

And so to Galveston, again.

The Gremlins won 102 games, the most in the Jade, and went 38-19 after the deadline. The series opens there on October 8 and 9, comes to Montreal for Games 3, 4 and 5 from the 11th, and returns to Galveston for 6 and 7 if it gets that far. The clubs split four games in Galveston in June, and Montreal scored one more run than it allowed across them.

They have met three times in October. Galveston won the first round in 2004, three games to two. Montreal won it in 2007, three games to one. And Galveston won it in 2030, in four, when the quiet ended. The championship this city still talks about, the one from 2005, did not go through Galveston at all, which I mention only because I know some of you will look.

I said in August that I did not have a register for this team. I have one now. It is a team that sells in July, wins in August, frets in September, and plays in October. I am told that makes three Octobers in a row. I will believe it in the spring.
