TIMES-CRESCENT

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Mudcats lose 100th on final day, first since 2009

BY **THÉO DELACROIX** · TIMES-CRESCENT

In 2009, the year after Ryan took over, this club lost 106 games, and for the 22 seasons that followed it did not lose a hundred again, through two championships and a 105-win summer and all the ordinary years in between that kept the beat. On October 5 in Cincinnati, Joe Barnes won his last start of the season, 5-4, and the count stayed at 99 for one more night. On October 6 the Regents won their 100th game, 9-0, and the Mudcats lost theirs.

Sixty-two and 100. It is the second hundred-loss season in this franchise's 32 years.

In August I wrote that a club this far out might not have much to sell, since its most valuable arm was on the injured list and the rest of its expiring money was not money a contender pays for. On deadline day Ryan sold three players anyway. Jose Nolasco went to Denver for a third-round pick in 2034, and Denver took the $25 million he is owed next season along with him. Jahiem Bryant, who had 15 saves here, went to Galveston for a third-rounder next year and a fourth-rounder in 2034. Chris Holmes, a starter at Baton Rouge, went to Milwaukee for Miguel Palafox, a young left-hander.

All three of them are on clubs that are playing this month. Bryant has a 0.99 earned run average in Galveston. Holmes pitched to a 2.36 out of Milwaukee's bullpen. Nolasco hit 10 home runs for Denver, which got in on the final day.

The club they left went 20-37. August was 8-19, September was 10-15, and after the deadline the Mudcats never won more than two games in a row.

Joe Barnes came back from the injured list on deadline day, the same day the trades went through, and made 12 more starts with a 4.11 earned run average. He finished the season at 3.51, with 202 strikeouts in

169 innings, and he is a free agent now, at the end of a contract that paid him $26.5 million this year. Whether there is a version of next season in which he pitches for this club is the first question of the winter.

The rotation threw more innings than any in baseball, as it did in May and as it did in August, which is the sound of a staff asked to carry more than it could. Bill Dixon threw 213 of them, and only two pitchers in the league threw more. After the deadline his earned run average was 3.29. David Mills took the ball 32 times and lost 20, more than any pitcher in baseball.

In August I wrote that the music in this lineup was coming from two young men, and that two is not a core, but it is a good two. Mark Williams went on the injured list on August 7 and was gone for 50 days. He batted 20 times after the deadline. Andy Chenault, who was hitting .326 when I wrote that, hit .222 afterward, with four home runs, and finished at .288 with 21 home runs and 81 runs batted in. With men in scoring position he hit .327 for the season. He is signed through 2035, and the second half of his summer does not change what the first half showed.

Alejandro Vargas, whom both prospect lists called the best young player in this organization in August, came up on August 30 and hit .153 in 111 plate appearances.

Eric McReynolds played 17 games after the deadline and hit .158. He played in the last one, on October 6 in Cincinnati. It was his 18th season in this organization, his contract ends with it, and he was on the 2017 team.

The winter has room in it.

Free agency will take about $70 million off the books: Barnes, Vinny Aguilar, Travis Williams, McReynolds, John Williams and Trevor Jordan. About $27 million is committed to next season, and $19 million of that is Chenault. Dixon, Mark Williams, Pat Vargas and nearly all of the young pitching staff are still under club control.

Below them, the picture has changed since August. The league's own list of its top 100 prospects, dated October 8, has two Mudcats on it, and neither was on it in August. Michael Herr, the shortstop taken in the third round in May, hit 13 home runs between Acadiana and Shreveport and is 88th. Tom Lopez made 27 starts at Gulfport and is 100th. Vargas, Adam Elliott and Adam Marek, the three Mudcats on that list in August, are not on it now.

Kevin Zaragoza, this year's first-round pick, the 17-year-old I last saw on his way to Lake Charles, went 7-2 there with a 2.18 earned run average in 15 starts. Sam McClure struck out 69 in 54 1/3 innings out of the bullpen at Shreveport. Baton Rouge won 79 games and finished first in its division.

Ryan has run this club since 2008, through both of its hundred-loss seasons and the two championships in between. Before 2030 this franchise had never had two losing seasons in a row. It has now had three. A

front office that sells at the deadline and leaves next year's books nearly empty has chosen a word for what comes next, whether or not anyone in the building has said it out loud.

In August I wrote that I could not tell whether this song was ending or only changing key. It is changing key. It will take a while to learn the new one.
