THE OKLAHOMAN SPORTS DESK

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Outlaws beat winners at last, 20-16, but lose Lee

BY **MARGUERITE YOO** · THE OKLAHOMAN SPORTS DESK

In August I wrote that I did not need a model to find this club's variable. It was 21-34 against teams with winning records, and it was sitting in plain sight.

Here is what the same number did after I printed it. From August 2 to the end of the season the Outlaws went 20-16 against the clubs that finished above .500. They finished the year 41-50 against them, which is still a losing record and still the weakest part of a 95-67 season. But the part of it played after the deadline was a winning record, against a schedule that included six games with Kansas City and six with Virginia. I asked Rees in September whether this was the stretch that would answer the question. The honest answer is that it answered half of it.

The club finished third in the Topaz, five games behind Virginia and two behind Kansas City, and third in the Fire Conference. It won nine straight from August 22 to August 31. It went into the postseason for the 23rd time in 32 seasons.

It goes in without Brian Lee. On September 5 he tore the ligament in his elbow, and he is expected to miss 11 to 12 months. He was 11-5 with a 2.40 earned run average and 186 strikeouts, the best starter on the staff, and he is 27. The Outlaws lost the game he left and the next one, five straight in all, before they recovered.

They recovered because the back of the rotation did something I said in August it had not done. Jonathan Cooper had a 4.79 earned run average when I last wrote. After the deadline he made 12 starts with a 3.41. Alex Garcia was at 5.42. After the deadline he made 12 starts with a 3.24, and on October 4 in San Juan he threw seven scoreless innings in a 2-0 win. Alex Cardenas, the one-year signing, finished 15-6 with a 3.31.

Jeremy Valenzuela, 28 and on the league minimum, made seven starts after the deadline and finished the season at 3.16.

I asked Rees in August who would start Game 4 for this club in October. The answer, which nobody could have given in August, is that Game 4 is now the easier one to fill. It is Game 1 that changed.

The staff allowed 146 home runs, the fewest in baseball. Shane Drew saved 44, second in the league, with a 1.94 earned run average at 35, in the last year of his contract.

And Jeremy Porten won the home run title. I asked Rees in September whether he would. Porten finished with 46, two ahead of Montreal's Dean Salvucci and three ahead of Jared Mettler and Fernando Lopez. He hit .327, reached base at .423 and drove in 107. With a runner on second or third he hit .333 and reached base at .529. Three of the four walk-off wins this club had after the deadline were his: a home run in the 13th against Rochester on August 4, a single in the 10th against New Orleans on August 14, and a three-run home run against Memphis on September 18. He is 26, and he is signed through 2036, at $7.2 million this year and $36 million a year from 2034.

Manny Jimenez, who was hitting .229 when I last wrote, hit .271 with 14 home runs after the deadline and finished with 102 runs batted in.

The front office made no trades this season and posted nothing on the league's trade board. That did not change at the deadline. Below the big club, one Outlaw is on the league's top 100 prospects: Mark Barnes, the center fielder taken in the first round this spring, now 46th.

Now Mexico City.

The series opens there on October 8 and 9. Oklahoma City won five more games than the Luchadores and starts on the road, the price of finishing third in its own division. Games 3, 4 and 5 are here from the 11th, and Games 6 and 7, if needed, go back to Mexico City on the 15th and 16th. The Luchadores won three of four from the Outlaws in May, in Mexico City, and the clubs have not met since.

They have never met in October. Both were eliminated by Virginia last year, Oklahoma City in the quarterfinal and Mexico City in the round after. Mexico City went 3-12 against playoff clubs after the deadline, and Oklahoma City went 20-16. I have learned, on this beat since 2019, how little a regular-season split says about a seven-game series, and I have also learned what this franchise's readers think when somebody tells them that.

Twenty-three postseasons. Four conference championship series, all lost. No finals. I have built more models around that record than I would like to admit. This club beat winning teams for two months after I said it could not. Now it has to do it without the pitcher I would have handed the ball to first.