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North Stars turn one-run games around, punch 10th straight ticket

BY **ADA BRIGHTBILL** · ROCHESTER POST-EXPRESS

On the morning of August 2 the North Stars were 5-20 in games decided by a single run. I wrote that somewhere in the next six weeks the club would play another one, and the same bullpen would be asked to hold it. It played 15 more. It won 10 of them.

That is the hinge of the last two months, and it did not swing the way I expected. Rochester went 35-22 from deadline day to the end of the season, finished 95-67, and made its 10th postseason in 10 seasons in this city. It finished third in the Jade, seven games behind Galveston, the first time since 2026 that a North Stars club has gone into October without its division. The 2026 club won the championship anyway. This one also finished with the best offense in baseball by every measure I know how to print: first in runs with 820, first in batting average, on-base percentage, slugging and OPS, all five, the same as in August.

The deadline first, because Keven told me about it himself, at length, and every answer he gives goes in the file.

> *"Well shortly after that article published we did make a move and kept our 1st round selection," he said. Las Vegas sent Mike Talamante and Darius Valentine. Rochester sent its 2033 third- and eighth-round picks, Javy Benavides, with this club still paying a quarter of his salary, and Danny Sanchez. "Rebuilding the farm is a priority for me but it is going to be difficult to do without trading our stars away, which won't be happening as long as the window is open. And we feel the window is open. We're hitting our stride."*

On the same day Toronto sent Zachary Heal for a 2034 third-rounder, and Rochester sold its 2033 sixth-round pick to New Orleans for $1 million.

Here is what those arms did after August 2. Talamante pitched 16 2/3 innings in 18 appearances with 10 holds and a 6.48 earned run average, and on October 5 he partially tore the ligament in his elbow. He is expected to miss seven to eight months. Valentine gave up five earned runs in 14 1/3 innings. Heal had a 5.79.

The man who closed the gap was already here. Steve Gillis came from Chicago in April. After the deadline he pitched 29 1/3 innings across 27 appearances with a 1.23 earned run average, 13 saves and two blown, and by win probability added he was worth more to this club in those two months than any other pitcher on the staff. When I asked Keven in September who would pitch the ninth inning of a one-run game in October, he gave me four words: "Whoever is the hottest." On the evidence, he already knows who that is.

The lineup earned its numbers. Jim Reiser, the 2025 first-round pick paid $4.2 million this year, hit 15 home runs after the deadline and finished with 29. Vince Hernandes hit 14 after it, including the three-run home run in the 11th inning that beat Southland 3-0 on August 7. Jeff Williams drove in 117, second in the league to Boston's Edgar Tyler. Williams cooled after the deadline, a .271 hitter over those two months, and he is still the hitter I would want up with the game on the line. By StatsPlus's count, with a runner on second or third this season Williams hit .359 and slugged .635 across 203 plate appearances.

He is 24 and on the league minimum, and the contract question I put to Keven in September had a short answer. "He's next on our list, yes. Reek and Liddick came first and I'm glad I got them both signed early in my tenure." Joey Reek, the Pitcher of the Year winner, is signed for five more years starting in 2033, $19 million and then $35 million a season, with a club option at the end. Tim Liddick, the catcher, is signed for five more years at $36 million a season. Those are the first long commitments of the new regime, and both of them went to players who came to Rochester as young men in trades and became stars here.

Which brings me to the farm. In 2019 the Winston-Salem Camels lost 117 games, and the turnaround that followed was grown in their minor-league system. I have been writing that, one way or another, for 13 years. This season, every one of Rochester's six affiliates finished seventh or eighth in its division. Triple-A Los Angeles was 59-73. Double-A San Francisco was 44-88. The two High-A clubs were 47-85 and 34-98. The league's own list of its top 100 prospects still has no North Stars on it. DSA Reports, in its list dated July 19, has one: Ian Nelson, 87th, an 18-year-old the club drafted 30th overall in May. The arms the organization thinks most of are a long way from here: Andy Brady struck out 31 in 20 2/3 innings of relief at Low-A El Paso, and Chris King, the 2029 first-round pick, made five starts at Fort Worth. Keven has told me twice now that rebuilding the farm is the priority and that the stars are not for sale while the window is open. That holds as long as the stars keep winning. The farm is where the next ones were supposed to come from.

Baltimore, again.

The series opens there October 8 and 9. Rochester won one more game than the Blue Crabs and starts on the road, which is what finishing third in the Jade costs. Games 3, 4 and 5 are here from October 11, and 6 and 7, if needed, back in Baltimore. The North Stars lost all four meetings this season, all of them at home from June 3 to 6, two of them in extra innings, one of them 18. They scored five runs in those four games. Since August 2, Baltimore went 38-19.

The October record runs the other way. Baltimore won the 2024 first round between these clubs, four games to one. Rochester has won the three meetings since: the 2027 semifinal in six, the 2029 quarterfinal in five and last year's quarterfinal in seven. It won the championship in 2027 and in 2029. Nobody in this city needs me to tell them what the road through Baltimore has led to before.

This is Keven's first October in the chair and the club's tenth in a row. The lineup is the best in baseball. The question I have been asking since May is whether the late innings would hold, and for two months the answer has been yes, mostly because of a reliever who was here before any of us started asking.