EL NUEVO DÍA DEPORTES

OCTOBER 8, 2032 · THE SAN JUAN STOGIES BEAT

Stogies lose last five, back into October anyway

BY **NÉLIDA CRUZ BETANCOURT** · EL NUEVO DÍA DEPORTES

On the night of September 21, 34,795 people came to the ballpark for a game against Huron, one of the clubs San Juan was fighting for the last places in October, and the game went to the 11th. Chris Whittington singled, and the winning run came home. The next night, with 34,452 in the stands, it was 2-2 in the ninth when Whittington hit one over the wall, and they stood up again. Two nights, two endings, the same young man. It is the weekend this city will remember from this season, whatever happens next.

And something does happen next. San Juan is in the postseason.

It got there the hard way. On the morning of August 2 the Stogies held the last playoff place in the Fire Conference by two games, at 54-51. They went 28-29 after that. August was 12-15. September was 16-9, including five straight wins from September 19 to September 24, and the two nights against Huron were the middle of it. Then the Stogies lost their last five games of the season. They clinched on October 4 anyway, while they were losing, because San Diego lost too. They finished 82-80, tied with Milwaukee and Huron, and all three are in.

The last five losses came after Scott Moore was hit by a pitch on September 27 and diagnosed with a concussion. He is expected to miss about two weeks. He scored 98 runs this season and stole 53 bases, and there is no one on this roster who does what he does at the top of the order. Evan Gentz, who hit the walk-off home run against Memphis on September 13, strained an oblique two days later and is out about five weeks. So is Marvin Lewis, with a sore elbow. Mike Boller strained an oblique on October 1 and should be back about now.

I asked Chuck in August whether a club holding the last spot should buy or trust its young hitters. The Stogies made no trades this season and posted nothing on the trade board, and I wrote that I thought trusting the kids was the right answer. I still think so, and the kids are the reason I can. Whittington, 24, on the league minimum, a 14th-round pick in 2027, hit .296 with 30 home runs and 99 runs batted in. Frank Mildner, 24, hit 22 home runs in 101 games. Jason Parker, 28, hit 30 home runs, drove in 98, and after the deadline hit .308 and slugged .559.

I also wrote, more than once, that Danny Cunningham should play more. He did, and after the deadline he hit .184 in 114 plate appearances. I was wrong about that.

The pitching held this team up. The staff finished eighth in the league in earned run average and second in strikeouts. Dustin Potter, the man the crowd stood up for in July when he reached 2,000, finished with 231 strikeouts, third in the league, and a 2.63 earned run average after the deadline. Isaiah Logan had a 2.65 over the same stretch. Jonathan Mendoza, who was sent down to Havana in the summer after a 6.21 earned run average, came back and made 12 starts with a 3.65. In the bullpen, John Campbell struck out 113 in 87 2/3 innings, Bill Snyder finished at 1.80, and D.J. Zaccardelli saved 33 games.

There were six walk-off wins after the deadline, which is a lot of nights for a crowd to remember. Dylan Cuffie won one in the 11th against Tampa Bay, Val Elizarraraz with a home run in the 10th against Milwaukee, and the club won in the 11th against Virginia on September 7 without a run batted in at all.

The farm underneath all of it had its best year in a while. The two High-A clubs, Santo Domingo and Nassau, and the Low-A club in Cayman all finished first in their divisions. Matt Giglio, who is 19, saved 35 games at Nassau. Chris Cobble, the catcher I told you to write down twice, hit .312 with nine home runs at Santo Domingo after hitting .358 at Nassau. Adam Rall hit 20 home runs at Havana and is 13th on the league's prospect list.

And now, Kansas City.

The Scouts won 97 games, and the series opens there on October 8 and 9. Games 3, 4 and 5 are here, in front of this crowd, from October 11. If it goes six or seven, it goes back to Kansas City on the 15th and 16th.

I will not hide the season series, because you will look it up anyway. Kansas City won nine of the 12 games. One of them took 16 innings, here, on August 30. Two more were the last two games San Juan played in Kansas City, on September 25 and 26, both lost in the 11th inning on the last swing of the night. The Stogies won the other game of that series, 1-0, on September 24.

These two clubs have never met in October. This franchise has been to 18 postseasons now, and it won a championship in 2006, before it came here, as the Louisville Rivermen. Its last series win was in 2018. Its last October was 2029, in this building, and I wrote in August that the next one was two games away.

It was. The building stood up for it twice in one weekend in September, and it will be standing on the 11th.
