TORONTO SPORTING LIFE

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Griffins stage five walk-offs, serve up league-high homers

BY **HOLLIS WEIR** · TORONTO SPORTING LIFE

Qu-bing Jiang came up in the bottom of the 10th inning on August 9 with the bases loaded and the score tied, and hit a grand slam to beat Oahu 7-3. It was the first week of a new front office, and it was the first of five walk-off wins this club had after the deadline.

Brian Baker won two of the others, a single in the 10th against Baltimore on September 6 and the run he drove in to win it in the 11th against Chicago on September 20. Lance Stagg hit a home run in the 12th to beat Baltimore the night after Baker did. And on September 27, against Somerville, the best team in baseball, Bobby Salgado hit a three-run home run in the bottom of the ninth of a tied game, and the Griffins won 5-2.

I am starting there because those are the nights I will remember, and because the rest of this season needs a little help.

In August I wrote that the office at the end of the hall had a name on the door again. At the deadline I asked Brandon, in his first week, where he would start. He gave me the whole answer, and it is the first Toronto general manager's answer this column has been able to print.

> *"We'll do a little bit of retooling in the offseason but we have some talent in certain spots," he said. "We just have to piece it all together. A few people will have to go to make room so we may move a few guys at the deadline."*

He moved two. Luis Martinez went to Boston, and back came Boston's third-round pick next year and three young players: Blake Elmore, a catcher, and two minor leaguers, Joel Esparza and Ethan Murphy. Zachary Heal, the second pick in the 2026 draft, went to Rochester for its third-round pick in 2034.

I also asked him how much of his plan runs through the farm.

> *"We definitely want to keep a strong farm system and draw a good portion of our roster from that but thats just 1 part of the equation," he said. "We'll need to do well in Rule 5, Free Agency, and even trades as well."*

Then the club went 29-28 the rest of the way, which is a winning record, and in this building that counts for something. It finished 74-88, sixth in the Sapphire. October was 1-5, and the last game was an 11-1 loss in Philadelphia.

Now the people.

Jason Mills, the man who takes four pitches and then hits one 430 feet, hit 41 home runs, tied for fifth in the league. After the deadline he reached base at .394. On deadline day itself he hit the hardest ball any Griffin hit all season, a home run at 123.5 miles an hour, which is a fine way to spend a deadline day.

Alex Moralez, who is 24 and signed through 2036, hit 37 home runs and drove in 102. Bobby Salgado, who arrived in February and nobody talked about, hit .293 with 15 home runs. Charlie McCullough finished with a 0.84 WHIP out of the bullpen, and Juan Martinez, who is 35 and joined the club in July, went 5-0 with a 2.09.

Ken Henderson still deserves better than he gets. He struck out 228 batters, tied for fourth in the league, and after the deadline he had a 3.31 earned run average with 81 strikeouts and 14 walks. He is still here, and he is signed for next year.

And then the part of the story I said in August I am least equipped to write, and have to anyway. This staff allowed 245 home runs, the most in baseball. The rotation's earned run average finished 27th. The club hit 210 home runs of its own, sixth in the league, and still lost 88 games, and a good share of the difference went the other way over the fence. If Brandon is retooling, I suspect he knows where to start.

As for the winter, most of the money is already spoken for. About $78 million is committed to next season, most of it to four people: Mills and Henderson at $20 million each, Jose Figueroa at $16 million and Moralez at $15 million. Chris Gresham has signed for two more years. Free agency clears about $21 million, the largest piece of it Joe Case. Salgado, Baker, Jiang and Stagg are all under club control.

The farm, which Brandon says is one part of the equation, has more names on the league's top-100 prospect list than it did in August: six. Mike Larson is 54th. Chase Williams is 62nd. David Tucker, a 20-year-old center fielder at Double-A, is new to the list at 69th. Nick Knight is 76th. Ron Turner, the 19-year-old I keep telling you about, is 94th after finishing his summer at Thunder Bay, and Rafael Castano is 98th.

DSA Reports, in its list dated July 19, had Larson 15th and Turner 25th. The affiliates finished 23rd in combined record, which is the part of the equation that still needs work.

Two championships hang in this building, both won in New York. The last October this city saw was 2022. But this year a grand slam in the 10th, a three-run home run off the best team in baseball and a general manager who answers his messages all happened here, in Toronto, to this club. That is ours. I will take it.
