RICHMOND DISPATCH-LEDGER

OCTOBER 8, 2032 · THE VIRGINIA REBELS BEAT

Rebels win 12 straight, climb from 17-28 to Topaz crown

BY **BO THREADGILL** · RICHMOND DISPATCH-LEDGER

It was the 10th inning on the fourth of August, at home, against Galveston, a 1-1 game that had no business going that long on a Wednesday night. Chris Wilson, who had spent June on the injured list and come back to a lineup that needed him more than anyone said out loud, put a pitch over the wall, and the Rebels won 2-1. It was the second win of what became 12 straight, from August 3 to August 16, and if you want to know when this season turned into the one we are about to watch, I would put my finger there.

On the morning of August 2 Virginia was 60-45 and three games behind Kansas City. I wrote that the club was 17-28 inside the Topaz and 43-17 against everybody else, and that 39 of the last 57 games would be played inside the division that had beaten it 28 times. I asked Kaden what the division had figured out.

> *"You play the same teams enough and they'll find out more about your squad, I guess they're familiar with us," he said. "But we're shaking things up. If we wanna win the division we have to win against the teams in our division, it's that simple."*

It was that simple, and it was not easy, and they did it. From deadline day to the last day of the season the Rebels went 26-13 inside the Topaz. When I asked Kaden in September what would change over the last 33 games, all of them in the division, he said, "Just gotta close out the year strong. We're finally decently healthy, we just have to execute now. Prove that we want it." They went 22-11.

Virginia finished 100-62, the best record in the Fire Conference and the division title by three games over Kansas City. From August 2 on it was 40-17, and no club in baseball did better over those two months. It went 21-6 in August. It won 14 of the 17 one-run games it played after the deadline. Four of those ended at

home with the other team walking off the field: Wilson on August 4; Jim Bergeman with a single to beat Memphis on August 27; a run that crossed without an RBI to beat Oklahoma City on September 5; and Tim Ranieri, one of the deadline arrivals, with a single in the 10th against Huron on September 10.

I owe the front office a paragraph on the deadline, because in August I wrote that two starters had come over from Southland and neither had pitched. Kaden explained it simply. "They were in the DFA slot because I hadn't put them on the team yet, they'll pitch some innings for us." Barry Richards, 36, pitched them. He made 10 starts, went 6-2 and had a 3.94 earned run average. Jon O'Rourke hurt his elbow on August 10 and has not pitched since.

Then on deadline day Kaden made two more. Vancouver sent D.J. Bakker, kept half his salary and added $1 million and a 10th-round pick, for three minor leaguers: Jonathan Stech, Shane Schroeder and Jonathan Sawyer. Southland sent Ben Becker and Ranieri, kept half of both salaries, and took four: Dave Shahan, Willie Lopez, Diego Munoz and Pat Taylor. Shahan is the one I called the best young hitter in this organization in May. He is in Southland now. Becker hit 14 home runs in 48 games for the Rebels and batted .190, which I would not have believed if I had not watched most of them. Bakker made 12 starts with a 4.82 earned run average.

The pitching that won the division came mostly from people who were already here. Zeke Tovar appeared in 88 games, saved 38, struck out 147 men in 117 1/3 innings and finished with a 2.30 earned run average and a 0.89 WHIP. John Gulbrandson had a 1.99 with 22 holds, and Aaron Gillespie held 27 games. The bullpen carried a rotation that finished 22nd in the league, and it did it for two months with Curt Graham and Jacob Hickenbottom, $33 million worth of pitchers, never throwing a pitch all season.

Phil Church has not pitched since May 25. He is not ready.

So I asked Kaden in September who the fourth starter would be in October. He named two. "We just called up Matt Shearon, he's had a good start, could be in the mix. Also Barry Richards has looked good since coming over." Shearon made seven starts with a 1.75 earned run average, and on September 28 he had surgery to remove a bone spur from his elbow. He will miss about four months. So it is Richards, and Kaden said the rest himself: "Church and Hickenbottom are tough guys to fill in for, we have 4 planned opening day starters and our planned closer out for the year right now. We just gotta persevere like we've done all year. It isn't anything new, next man up always."

The lineup goes in nearly whole. Chris Schmotzer scored 100 runs, hit .291 and reached base at .385, and he is listed day-to-day with a hamstring that should not keep him out. Danny Meza drove in 100. Jesus Sifuentes, who hit .367 after the deadline before he hurt his knee on August 30, is back.

What is left in the system is thinner than it was. Francisco Benavides, the organization's best young player still here, hit .249 with eight home runs at Peninsula. The rest of the arithmetic went to Southland and Vancouver, and I think any of you would make that trade for an October like this one.

That leaves Milwaukee.

The series opens here on October 8 and 9, goes to Milwaukee for Games 3, 4 and 5 from the 11th, and comes back here for 6 and 7 if it needs to. The Mobsters finished 82-80, level with Huron and San Juan. Six of the eight teams in this division are playing in October, which is worth remembering the next time somebody tells you the Topaz is soft.

They have had this team's number. Milwaukee won eight of the 12 meetings this year and outscored Virginia 53-36. It won the 2011 first round between these clubs, the 2013 quarterfinal in seven, and the 2026 first round in five. Virginia won once, the 2029 quarterfinal, in six, on the way to a final.

I have covered two championship series runs that nobody saw coming, in 2025 and last year. This team was 12-20 on the fourth of May and is the best in its conference this morning, and the division that beat it 28 times by August is the one it went through to get here.