BALTIMORE LEDGER-STAR

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Crabs muzzle baseball's top offense, sweep Stars

BY **ROSALIND FEENEY** · BALTIMORE LEDGER-STAR

In June, in Rochester, the Blue Crabs beat the North Stars four straight and allowed five runs. I wrote before the series that this would mean more if I had not been here for the last three Octobers between these clubs. This week Baltimore beat Rochester four straight again and allowed five runs again, and the club that had put this one out of the postseason in 2027, 2029 and last year in seven went home in the first round without a win.

In other Octobers the bullpen is where this club came apart. This week it held.

Steve used it the way he has used it since August, which is to say early and without much ceremony. Jake McHan went six and two-thirds in Game 1, Arturo Flores got one out and Matt Locher the last six. Sam Kutka went five scoreless in Game 2 and Mike Van Voorhis threw three innings without allowing a hit before Johnny Cunnane finished it. In Game 3 Antonio Amaya left in the fourth with a blister on his finger and a 4-0 lead, and Michio Tanaka, David Crespin and Locher covered the last five and a third. In Game 4 Steve Westbrook went five and two-thirds and gave up one run, on a wild pitch, and three relievers got the rest. Over four games the bullpen pitched 15 innings and allowed three runs. Two of them came on a home run by Dave Smith in the eighth inning of Game 3, with Baltimore up four.

The staff's earned run average for the series was 1.25. Rochester, which scored more runs than any club in baseball this year, hit .179 and went 2-for-26 with runners in scoring position.

Locher is the name I would underline. He pitched four innings in two games, struck out seven, allowed nothing, won the first game and saved the third, and he did it in the innings that in other Octobers have been the ones I wrote about afterward.

The hitting came late in two games and early in the other two. Game 1 was 1-1 until the eighth, when Andy Hernandez doubled to start it and Matt Lamberson, Alex Mojica, Rick Duda and Justin Clay drove in five, Clay two of them with a triple. Game 2 was settled by a two-run home run from Victor Barboza in the sixth that went 427 feet. In Game 3, in Rochester, Lamberson hit a two-run home run in the fourth at 116 miles an hour and three batters later Duda hit another, and the club that had beaten Baltimore the last three times they met in October trailed 4-0. Game 4 was 1-1 into the seventh, and then Lamberson homered, Barboza homered, 460 feet, and Andy Hernandez and David Peck drove in two more.

Lamberson went 5-for-15 with two home runs and was named Player of the Game in Game 3. Barboza had two home runs and four runs batted in. Peck, who hit .329 with men in scoring position during the season, went 2-for-16. Fabio Cardia went 2-for-17. Baltimore swept anyway.

Westbrook deserves his own line again. I said in August that he was not part of the paragraph about the rotation working, and then he went 7-2 after the deadline. He started the clinching game in Rochester and allowed one run. That is twice now he has proved me wrong.

Bell is still on the injured list with his back and has not pitched since September 24. Hernandez was hit on the thumb by a pitch in Game 3 and is listed as day-to-day.

Which brings us to Boston.

The Beacons beat Cincinnati in six. The first two games are here, Monday and Tuesday, then three in Boston starting Thursday, and two more here on the 25th and 26th if it goes the distance. Baltimore won the season series 8-4. The clubs have met once in October, in 2012, when this franchise was the Washington Generals and Boston's was the Lehigh Valley Scrapples, and Washington won in four.

Nine postseasons in 10 years since the club came home. Two trips to a conference championship series, in 2023 and 2027, and none to a final. This club is now one series from a third, and it gets there by beating a team from its own division that it beat eight times in 12.

The worst thing the bullpen did all week was a two-run home run in the eighth inning of a game Baltimore led by four. That is the most hopeful thing I have written about this club in October.