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# Underwood's two-inning saves lift Rams past Herons

BY **WESLEY TALLGRASS** · SHERIDAN PRESS AND THE WYOMING WIRE

Forty-one degrees in Huron on Wednesday, cloudy, a 28-minute rain delay in the fifth, and the Rams down 2-1 going to the seventh. Danny Hess swung at the first pitch and hit it 113 miles an hour past first base for a triple. Jimmy Smith balked him home.

Two outs later, with George Huckfeldt on second, Huron walked Bill Raymond on purpose. Brian Freimuth singled to left-center and Huckfeldt scored. Brad Battiste singled to center and Raymond scored. Chris Sandvik hit a home run off John Underwood in the eighth, and that was the last run anybody scored. Big Horn 4, Huron 3. Four games to one.

Before the series I asked Johnny how much Underwood had left after 83 appearances, and who else he trusted in the ninth. He named one man.

> *"John has been clutch and able to eat up a ton of late inning games," he said. "He's our guy in the postseason in the late innings."*

He meant it. Underwood pitched the eighth and the ninth in Game 2, again in Game 3 and again in Game 5. Six innings in five days, at 34. He gave up the tying run in the ninth inning of Game 2 with a 3-2 lead at home, and in the 10th Malachi Lott walked two men and Danny Perez doubled them both in. Huron won that one 5-3. Underwood saved the other two. In Game 3 he walked three batters in his two innings and gave up nothing else.

That is the part I keep coming back to. This staff walked fewer men than any in baseball this season, 385 in 162 games. It walked 19 in five against Huron. It struck batters out at exactly its season rate. It just put more of them on first base, and in Game 2 that is exactly how a 3-2 lead became a 5-3 loss.

Nick Williams was the exception. He walked 24 men in 195 innings during the season and none in Game 3: five and two-thirds innings, two hits, one run, the run a home run by Egidio Vercesi. Nick Hill got four outs behind him. Josh Ferguson hit a ball 108 miles an hour into the seats in left in the sixth, and Big Horn won 2-1. John Morris, the deadline call-up, started Games 1 and 5 and gave up two runs in nine innings with 11 strikeouts. Jeff Creel and Miguel Sanchez each pitched into the sixth.

Bill Raymond hit .500. Ten hits in 20 at-bats, two home runs, seven runs scored, three stolen bases, and the first home run of the series, in the first inning of Game 1 at home, where it was 54 degrees and the wind was blowing out to left. By the seventh inning of Game 5 Huron had seen enough of him to walk him with first base open. I understand why. It did not work.

Johnny told me Freimuth and Ferguson were the kind who come up clutch. Freimuth went 8-for-20 with five runs batted in, homered in the first inning of the clincher, drove in the go-ahead run in the seventh, and was named Player of the Game. Ferguson, who hit 19 home runs after the deadline, went 5-for-22, and one of the five won Game 3.

Two weeks ago I wrote that Danny Hess hit .218 after the deadline. He went 6-for-18 against Huron with two doubles, the triple and a home run. Cody Verner drove in three in the 10-3 win in Game 4. The bottom of the order did nothing. Ken Christensen went 1-for-19 with nine strikeouts and Neil Greene went 0-for-17.

I also wrote that the number to watch was .220, what this lineup hit with runners in scoring position after the deadline. Against Huron it was 13-for-53. That is .245. Better. Not enough better to stop watching it.

Now Mexico City.

Games 1 and 2 are here on Monday and Tuesday. Games 3, 4 and 5 are in Mexico City from Thursday, and if it goes six or seven it comes back to the valley on the 25th and 26th. The clubs split 12 games this year, six apiece, and Big Horn won five of the last six, including the 1-0 game on August 30 that ended on Raymond's walk. Mexico City finished a game behind the Rams in the Ruby and swept Oklahoma City in the first round, with nine home runs in four games.

The two clubs met once before in October. Last year, in this round, Mexico City won it four games to two.

By Monday Underwood will have had four days off. Johnny is going to need him for more than three games this time, or he is going to need somebody else for the ninth. I would still like to know who that is.