THE GALVESTON GROTTO

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Gremlins' bats vanish; 102-win season ends in sweep

BY **RUTHIE ALCORN** · THE GALVESTON GROTTO

Four games, four runs. Montreal beat us 3-1, 6-2, 2-1 and 6-0, and the second-best record in baseball was done on October 12 without winning a game.

I asked Jeremy before the series whether Jeff Buckmaster would start Game 1. "Yes, he started game one," he wrote back, after he had. I also asked what had changed since Rochester put us out in the first round last year. "The only thing that changed," he said, "was we played less games than we did last season." He added an eye-roll. Last year it went seven. This year it went four. He is not wrong.

Buckmaster did his part. He gave up one run in five and a third innings at home on the 8th and struck out seven, and it was 1-1 in the eighth when Jahiem Bryant came in. Bryant had not allowed a home run since he got here in August. With two outs and a man on first, Chris Bethea hit one to right, and Montreal won 3-1.

The next night Montreal scored four in the second inning, none of them earned against Chris Cawley because of a two-out error at second base, and two more in the seventh when Jeremy Horrocks walked four men in two-thirds of an inning, two of them with the bases loaded. Horrocks had the best earned run average in the league among pitchers with 40 innings. It was 6-2.

In Montreal, in 41 degrees, Jeremy Lowry gave up solo home runs in the first and second and left in the third with back spasms. The bullpen threw five and two-thirds scoreless innings after him. Oscar Mitchell homered in the fifth. We lost 2-1.

The last game was over early. Ricardo Sainz faced one batter, struck him out and left with a blister on his finger. Jong-su Im struck out 12 of us in five and two-thirds innings, and Dean Salvucci's three-run home run in the eighth made it 6-0.

The pitching gave up 17 runs in four games and only 13 of them were earned. The hitting lost it. We hit .201. With runners in scoring position we went 2-for-26, and after the deadline we had hit .282 in those spots, second in baseball. Ashton Turner went 3-for-17. Lance Fitzgerald went 2-for-16 with six strikeouts. We struck out 34 times in four games and hit two home runs.

In 2030 we swept Montreal in the first round. That was the last series this club won. Now it has gone out in the first round two years running, once in seven and once in four. I have been through two of this franchise's rebuilds on this beat, and I know the difference between a bad team and a good team that had a bad week. This was the second one. It still counts.

The winter is shorter on money than on decisions. Three regulars are free agents: Danny Adams, who drove in 93 runs, Daniel Frandsen, who hurt his rib cage running the bases in Game 2, and Miguel Chavez, our catcher. Together they made about $26 million this year. The club already owes $82.7 million for 2033, and $35.2 million of that is Fitzgerald's, in the last year of his deal.

The bigger conversation is the one Jeremy told me in September could wait "another season or two." Greg Wilks and Lowry are both eligible for arbitration this winter, and so are Buckmaster, Bryant, Nelson Mata and Mitchell. Wilks struck out 208 in 210 innings. Lowry won 16. They were on the league minimum this year. They will not be next year, and that is the bill for building a 102-win team out of players you drafted and developed yourself.

Turner is signed through 2035. Buckmaster is 26 and went 6-0 after the deadline. Antonio Perez saved 41 games at 24. Bryant had a 0.99 after he got here, before one swing in the eighth inning. None of them is going anywhere. The series took four games. The plan takes longer, and I have watched it work twice.