ROCHESTER POST-EXPRESS

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Top offense scores five runs; North Stars swept

BY **ADA BRIGHTBILL** · ROCHESTER POST-EXPRESS

Rochester had played 19 postseason series since the franchise came here from Winston-Salem, and it had never lost one without winning a game. It has now. Baltimore won 6-1, 3-0, 5-3 and 5-1, and the club that led baseball this season in runs, batting average, on-base percentage, slugging and OPS scored five runs in four games.

> *"It's been Gillis time, Ada," Keven told me before the series, when I asked who had the ninth inning. He was candid that the club was banged up, "especially with Talamante and Rojo out again," and confident it would get past Baltimore.*

Steve Gillis never pitched. Rochester led for three and a half innings of Game 1, after Jim Reiser's home run in the first, and for half an inning of Game 4, and never in a spot that called for the man who saved 13 games after the deadline with a 1.23 earned run average. That is the series in one line.

The starters did enough to win most of these games in most seasons. Joey Reek, the Pitcher of the Year winner, went seven innings in Game 1 and allowed two runs. Mark Christensen struck out 11 in six and a third in Game 2 and lost 3-0. Tyler Vargas allowed one hit in five and a third innings in Game 4, and no earned runs, and was named Player of the Game in a 5-1 loss. Only Victor Hernandez, in Game 3, was hit hard: two home runs in the fourth inning and five runs in four innings.

The bullpen gave up two big innings. In the eighth inning of Game 1, at 1-1, Reek gave up a leadoff double and five runs scored on the next five hits off Joey Anagnostopoulos and Mark Campbell. In the

seventh inning of Game 4, at 1-1, Matt Wetzel allowed two home runs, to Matt Lamberson and Victor Barboza, and four runs in two-thirds of an inning. Those two innings were nine of Baltimore's 19 runs.

The lineup hit .179. With runners in scoring position it went 2-for-26. Vince Hernandes went 0-for-15. Dave Smith went 2-for-18, one of the two a two-run home run in the eighth inning of Game 3 that made it 5-3. Jorge Garcia went 1-for-15 with seven strikeouts. Jeff Williams, who drove in 117 runs this season, went 3-for-15 and drove in none. Kevin Weasner went 7-for-14 with three doubles, and nobody got him home.

This is the fifth time these clubs have met in October since 2024, and the first time since 2024 that Baltimore has won. Rochester won the 2027 semifinal, the 2029 quarterfinal and last year's quarterfinal, and went on to the championship in two of those years.

The record now goes in the file next to the rest. Ten postseasons in 10 seasons in this city, three championships, and this one ended on October 12 in the first round. That has happened three other times, in 2023, 2024 and 2030.

The winter is where the file gets harder to read.

Christensen, 32, is a free agent. He went 15-7 with a 3.00 earned run average, in the last year of a deal that paid him $45 million this season, half of it covered by Cincinnati. Reiser, who hit 29 home runs, is a free agent, and so is Weasner. So is Anagnostopoulos. Their salaries come to about $38 million. Against that, the club has already committed $185.6 million for 2033, and the two largest pieces of it are Hernandes, $55 million in the last year of his deal, and the new extension for Tim Liddick, $36 million a season for five years starting next year. Williams, Keven told me in September, is "next on our list."

In my last piece I wrote that every one of Rochester's six minor-league affiliates finished seventh or eighth in its division this season, and that the league's own top 100 has no North Stars on it. That has not changed in two weeks. In 2019 the Winston-Salem Camels lost 117 games, and what came after was grown in a farm system that had the next player ready every time the club needed one. I have been writing that for 13 years. The free agents this winter include the pitcher who started Game 2 and the second baseman who hit .500 in the series. The arms the organization thinks most of, Chris King and Andy Brady, finished the year at High-A and Low-A. The system underneath does not have the next one ready.

Keven has said twice that the stars are not for sale while the window is open. This is his first October in the chair, and he is going to spend the winter deciding what that window is made of.