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Rams squander 2-0 lead, fall to Luchadores in seven

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Up two games to none, both of them at home, and the Rams lost four of the next five.

It started about as well as a series can. Forty-nine degrees on the first night, wind across the field at 16 miles an hour, and Miguel Sanchez did not allow a hit until the eighth inning. Josh Ferguson homered to left in the bottom of that inning and the Rams won 1-0. The next night they scored 14. Bill Raymond had three hits and drove in five, George Huckfeldt homered, and it was 14-4.

Then the series went to Mexico City, and Big Horn lost three games in three days.

Game 3 took five hours and 41 minutes. The Rams led 6-5 going to the eighth. John Underwood gave up a double, walked two men around a popup and a strikeout, and then walked Lorenzo Valenzuela on a full count with the bases loaded. Tie game. Nobody scored again until the 13th, when Ernesto Sanchez singled home two runs and Big Horn led 8-6. Nick Hill struck out two of the first three men he faced in the bottom of the inning. The Rams were one out from a 3-0 series lead. Then Josh Jacobsen singled, Mario Rivera tripled in two, Jonathan Coon was walked on purpose, and Fernando Lopez hit a three-run home run. Mexico City 11, Big Horn 8.

Game 4, Big Horn led 5-4 in the eighth. Matt Scott gave up a single that tied it and a double that scored two, and Mexico City won 7-5. Game 5 was 3-3 from the seventh, when Danny Hess tripled in the tying run, until the 11th, when Devonte Streeter gave up a three-run home run to Ryan Metcalf. Two of the three went to extra innings, and the bullpen took the loss in all three.

Before the series I asked Johnny whether Underwood would keep going two innings, and about the walks. Underwood pitched in Games 3, 5 and 7: five and a third innings, one run, four walks. The one run scored on the walk to Valenzuela. The staff walked 21 in seven games after walking 19 in five against Huron. It walked 385 all season.

Back home on Monday it was 44 degrees and cloudy, with a 31-minute rain delay in the sixth, and Nick Williams shut Mexico City out for five and a third innings. Raymond singled in two runs, Brian Freimuth doubled in two more, and the Rams won 6-0.

Tuesday was 41 degrees, clear, wind right to left at 11 miles an hour. Freimuth homered in the first inning, 414 feet. John Morris gave up three runs in the third, two of them on a home run by Michael Klaassen, and Metcalf singled in a fourth run in the fifth. Big Horn had 12 hits and three runs. Raymond singled in the last of them in the seventh to make it 4-3. Underwood pitched two scoreless innings, and Steve Parker set the Rams down in order in the ninth.

Raymond hit .406 in this series, 13-for-32, with 11 runs batted in. Ferguson went 12-for-31 and Hess 11-for-29. I wrote two weeks ago that the number to watch was what this lineup hit with runners in scoring position: .220 after the deadline, .245 against Huron. Against Mexico City it was .267, 23-for-86. Better again. It was also 86 chances in seven games, and 23 hits is not enough of them.

Mexico City put the Rams out in this round last year too, in six. This year it took seven, and the Rams scored eight more runs than it did.

The winter starts now, and it starts with the two men who pitched best in this series. Williams and Sanchez started four of the seven games and allowed four runs in 21 and two-thirds innings. Both reach free agency. So does Steve Schwarz, who made $26.4 million this year, along with Jeff Zullinger, Orsino Felan, Hill and Streeter, $47.9 million of salary in all. The club already has $131.4 million committed for 2033, most of it to Hess, Raymond, Brad Battiste and Ferguson. Ernesto Sanchez broke his thumb in Game 5 and Cody Verner sprained his knee in Game 6. Both will be fine by spring.

Johnny told me in September that as long as he has Bill Raymond, the window is open. Raymond is signed through 2035. The window is open. Williams and Sanchez are the first two phone calls, and if Johnny does not make them, somebody else will.