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Suchan hits, Locher closes; Crabs climb back over .500

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

The season started with three losses in Toronto and was 2-6 by April 5, and for a week in April the club that came within a game of the final looked like it had left something in Somerville. It is 25-23 now, 14-10 over the last 24 games, and in the part of the standings that decides October it is sixth of 16 in the Ice Conference, one game clear of the line. It is also fourth in its own division, five games behind Boston and Montreal, and that is the number I keep coming back to.

In March I wrote that third base was the softest spot in this lineup and that nothing had been done about it. I was right that nothing was done. Joe Suchan has done it himself. He is hitting .277 with seven home runs and 30 runs batted in, two behind Victor Barboza for the club lead, in about three-quarters of Barboza's plate appearances. After the season he had last year, I did not see it coming.

Barboza has been the best hitter on the club: .309/.403/.536, nine home runs, 32 runs batted in. Matt Lamberson leads the club with 11 home runs and is hitting .232, which is about what he does. The rest of the order is where the runs go missing. Rick D'Amore, the club's top pick in 2029, has played most days at second base and is hitting .162 in 129 plate appearances. Jorge Soto is at .225 at first, and David Peck, worth five wins to this club last year, is at .246 with a .383 slugging percentage. The club has scored 192 runs, 19th of 32. It has allowed 176, seventh-fewest. The record sits a little above .500 because the pitching has carried it there, and because the club is 9-5 in one-run games.

The pitching story starts with Roy Bell, who is 33 and in the last year of his contract and has pitched like a man who would like to talk about the next one. He is 4-3 with a 2.34 earned run average, 69 strikeouts against 11 walks in 57 and two-thirds innings, sixth in the league in strikeouts. The last thing anyone in

Baltimore saw him do in a game that mattered was get one out in the first inning of Game 1 in Somerville. He is the ace of this staff again.

Behind him the rotation splits two ways. Antonio Amaya, paid $1.8 million, has made nine starts with a 1.59 earned run average. Steve Westbrook, paid $31.6 million this year and the same next year, is 1-5 with a 4.20 and eight home runs allowed in 40 and two-thirds innings. Sam Kutka has eaten innings at a 3.99. Jake McHan, the 15-game winner, strained an abdominal muscle on April 10 and has been on the injured list since. Pete Johnson took those starts and is 0-4.

Then there is the ninth inning, which was the one thing the club spent money on this winter. Johnny Cunnane signed for three years and $48.5 million to close. He has pitched 12 and a third innings in 48 games, with three saves, the last of them on April 27, and three wins, all in extra innings. He has a 1.46 earned run average and has walked one man. Matt Locher, 24, on a minimum salary, has nine of the club's 12 saves and 62 strikeouts in 39 and a third innings. He has closed since April 10. The money went to the ninth inning and the ninth inning went to somebody else.

The bullpen also lost two men who did not allow a run against Somerville in November. Nate Davis tore his rotator cuff on April 4 and is gone for a year. Michio Tanaka fractured his elbow on April 30 and will miss four or five months. Arturo Flores, who is owed $13 million this year and next, has a 6.11 earned run average and 11 walks in 17 and two-thirds innings, and he is pitching in their innings.

At catcher, the question I asked in March has an answer. Alex Mojica has played in 44 of the 48 games. He has eight home runs and a .248 on-base percentage, and Mike Inman has 30 plate appearances. That is the trade the club made when it let Francisco Rodriguez go to Huron, and so far it is about what anyone would have guessed.

The farm is doing its part. Both Severna Park and Arnold are 23-13, and David Crespin is 5-0 with a 1.83 earned run average at Triple-A. With McHan out and Johnson where he is, he is the name I would expect to hear first. In the draft the club took Jose Gallardo, a pitcher, with the 30th pick.

The schedule turns toward the Jade now: two in Galveston, four at home against New Orleans, then Las Vegas. The club has gone 7-5 in each of the last two sims. Do that all summer and it is a playoff team again. Montreal and Boston have won five more games than this club over the same 48, and the three clubs will spend the next four months playing each other.