

LA PRESSE SPORTIVE

MAY 23, 2033 · THE MONTREAL MACHINE BEAT

Machine staff tops league, loses Larson; tied for first at 30-18

BY **ÉTIENNE CHARBONNEAU** · LA PRESSE SPORTIVE

T. J. Larson had made eight starts and had not given up a home run in any of them when he strained his hamstring on May 15. Fifty-one and a third innings, a 1.40 earned run average, and not one ball over a fence. The estimate is five to six weeks. I have watched pitchers in this uniform have springs like that before, and I have watched most of them end in June. This one ended earlier, and not for any reason that had to do with how he was pitching.

The staff he leaves behind is the best in the league. Montreal has the lowest earned run average in baseball at 2.88, the lowest walks-plus-hits rate, and has allowed 40 home runs, fewer than any club. The starters, at 2.75, are second only to one other rotation. Sam Kelly is 6-3 with a 2.80 and 71 strikeouts, tied for fourth in the league. John Kropp, healthy after a winter of mending, has a 2.35. Jong-su Im has a 2.56. Arturo Luna has pitched 25 innings out of the bullpen and has not allowed an earned run.

The record is 30-18, tied with Boston for first in the Sapphire and two games ahead of Somerville. The club opened 9-1, with eight straight wins from March 30 to April 8, and has not been below .500 all year. At home it is 18-6. Against Somerville it is 4-2: two of three here on the opening weekend and two of three there in April.

The offense is a stranger thing. Montreal has scored 232 runs, fourth in baseball, while batting .242 as a team. It hits home runs, 65 of them, and it does not run, 12 stolen bases, second-fewest. Dean Salvucci is hitting .199 with 11 home runs, which is close to what he did last year, when he hit .178 and was the most valuable player on the club. Willie Solis has 12, tied for eighth in the league, and a .283 on-base percentage. The two men carrying the batting average are the two the front office paid this winter: Pete Troiano, whose

five-year deal begins next season, is hitting .319 with a .548 slugging percentage from behind the plate, and Ryan Weigold, in the first year of his, is at .300. Third base has been the soft spot. Jon Morales is at .186.

The bullpen is where the record leaks. Nine blown saves, third-most in the league, and a 2-5 record in extra innings. Dave Santillan, with his new contract, has 10 saves and a 1.85, and he has also given up four home runs in 24 and a third innings, which is how a 1.85 still costs you games. Greg Tarver, 39, and Steve Caron are both on the injured list, and so is Jim Taunton, who had made five starts.

Without Larson and Taunton, the rotation is Kelly, Kropp, Im and two questions. Francisco Lopez has made five starts. Chris Shere, 20th on the game's Top 100 prospect list, is the closest of the young arms. Oscar Lopez has climbed to 13th on the same list, from 18th in March, and David Bustamante and Jorge Arbizu are 54th and 57th. Quebec is 24-12, first in its division, and Phil Payne has hit 11 home runs there. In the draft the club took Randy Justice, a shortstop, with the 25th pick.

The roster Josh paid for in January is the roster that is in first place in May, and the money he committed to Troiano, Solis and Santillan through 2038 looks, for now, like money spent on the right men.

In October I wrote, on time for once, that the Machine is a good baseball team. It is a better one than that in May. The schedule sends them to Rochester for two, then home for four with Cincinnati and three with Tampa Bay. The sun sets after half past eight this time of year. There will be a lot of baseball played in the light.