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MAY 23, 2033 · THE NEW ORLEANS MUDCATS BEAT

Kimya, Barnes keep Mudcats at .500 without Jimmy Smith

BY **THÉO DELACROIX** · TIMES-CRESCENT

The spring went 11-22, the worst I had seen in this city, and I wrote in March that bad springs had come before good summers here but never one that bad. Forty-eight games later the Mudcats are 24-24, third in the Jade, and on the morning of May 23 they hold the seventh of the Ice Conference's eight playoff places. Not good. Not bad. Even.

They have done it without the pitcher Ryan paid the most for. Jimmy Smith, signed in January for one year and $27.5 million, partially tore his labrum on March 17, before he threw a regular-season pitch, and the estimate was three months. He has not pitched. The $47.5 million Ryan put into two one-year arms has so far bought one of them.

That one is Joel King, and he has done what he was bought to do: 13 saves, tied for the most in the league, though with a 3.68 earned run average and 10 walks in 22 innings, not the 1.50 he had for Somerville after last year's deadline. The bullpen around him has been the leak, a 4.26 earned run average, 28th in the league, and 10 blown saves.

The rotation found its man somewhere else. Jugurtha Kimya is 24, a seventh-round pick in 2027, and he has made nine starts with a 2.16 earned run average, 63 strikeouts and 10 walks. Joe Barnes, the five-year contract, has a 2.93 and 67 strikeouts in the first year of it. Behind those two the staff gives up home runs, 72 of them, second-most in the league, and Tony Orduna has allowed 10 of them with a 6.14 earned run average.

In March I wrote that Joe Harris was the one move I could not square, a man who hit .225 in Fort Collins being paid more this year than Andy Chenault. Here is the square. Harris is hitting .281 with a .481 slugging percentage and 23 runs batted in, and Chenault, the Platinum Stick shortstop, the one fixed point in this lineup, is hitting .211. I had it backwards, and I am glad of it.

The rest of the offense has been young men nobody had in the lineup in March. Paul Woolsey, 27, is hitting .359 with seven home runs in 104 plate appearances. Mark Williams is at .339 at third. Dave McCloy, 23, who hit 17 home runs at Triple-A last year, has five here and a .551 slugging percentage. Pat Vargas has 18 stolen bases at second. The club is fifth in the league in batting average and sixth in steals, and it is 13-10 in one-run games, which is a little better than the run differential says it should be.

The farm has climbed. Michael Herr, the shortstop, is 41st on the game's Top 100 now, up from 74th in March, and is hitting .271 at Gulfport. Tom Lopez is 77th. Kevin Zaragoza, last year's first-round pick, is 86th, though he has had a hard start at Acadiana. Jorge Oviedo is 100th.

Home 12-12. Road 12-12. Three games over in one-run games, 15 runs under for the season. This is a club that has not decided what it is yet, and neither have I.

Chicago comes in for two, and then it is four in Baltimore and on to Boston. Smith should be back in June. When he is, this rotation will have the arm Ryan paid the most for, and we will find out whether this is a .500 club or something more.