THE GALVESTON GROTTO

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Turner hits .324, Fitzgerald nears return; Gremlins one back

BY **RUTHIE ALCORN** · THE GALVESTON GROTTO

Lance Fitzgerald is almost back. He tore that abdominal muscle on March 29, the second game of the season, and the estimate was four months. It took four months. He is at Red Bud now, and he has gone 3-for-3 there.

We are 50-55, tied with New Orleans for fourth in the Jade, and one game behind Tampa Bay for the last playoff spot in the Ice Conference. One game. On June 14 we were 27-41. We have gone 23-14 since.

I asked Jeremy last month if this team was buying now. He gave it to me in five words.

> *"No, we are getting healthy," he said.*

So there is your deadline. I asked about Ashton Turner, too, and whether he was where Jeremy needed him.

> *"Yes," he said. "I need him to hang in there, he's going to get some help soon."*

The help is one phone call away, and I have never seen a man need it less. Turner was Batter of the Month for April and again for July. He was player of the week on July 25. He is hitting .324 with a .411 on-base percentage and a .605 slugging percentage, with 22 home runs, 29 stolen bases and 83 runs scored, tied for the most in baseball. He went to the All-Star Game with Jahiem Bryant. He has won the MVP twice, and if the voters are looking at anything besides the standings he has a case for a third. We have scored 402 runs. He has scored 83 of them himself.

What he has had around him is Jose Veras, who is hitting .303, and Julian Mercado, who has 55 runs batted in on the minimum. After that it gets lean. Randy Wilkinson is at .223 with a sprained elbow. Edgar Rodriguez strained his back on July 18. Matthew Barlage is at .199 in right. Oscar Mitchell, our Great Glove right fielder, finally got on the field and is hitting .141 in 88 plate appearances. Matt Martin is at .149. These were the men Jeremy meant in April when he said some guys needed to step up. Some did. That is the way it goes with a list of hurt players this long.

Jeff Buckmaster has a 2.42 and Jason Rubin a 3.08. Jeremy Lowry is 7-11 with a 3.73 and has not deserved 11 losses. Greg Wilks has 142 strikeouts and a 4.50, and I said in May he was still the one I want on the mound in a big game. I still do, and he is 4-7. Antonio Perez, on the minimum, has 23 saves and a 2.18. Bryant has a 2.38 and 15 holds. Johnny Peterson, one of the arms we lost in April, is pitching at Red Bud again, 2-1 with a 2.57.

The road is still the road. We are 32-22 at home and 18-33 away. We swept Big Horn here two weeks ago, three of the best days we have had. Then we lost two of three to Myrtle Beach here and two of three in Mexico City, and that is what a 6-6 sim looks like when you can only win at the house.

I wrote in May about the crowds, and I said I would keep asking. Our average home crowd is 25,906, up 182 from then, 27th of 32 clubs. We have gone from 28th to 27th. Jeremy has told us where he stands on that, and I know you read it. I am going to keep asking you to come. It is a good team to watch right now, and you can see the best hitter in baseball for the price of a ticket.

Down at Red Bud, Chris Hein is hitting .324 with 10 home runs and is 21st on the game's Top 100. Josh Bassett is 80th. Justin Tidwell, 21, has 19 home runs at Shreveport. Hein is 23, and he is about as close as a prospect gets.

We go to Milwaukee for three, then home for Oklahoma City and Huron. Those are real tests. If we are still one game out when the deadline comes, Jeremy will have some thinking to do, and I expect he will tell me we are getting healthy.