TIMES-CRESCENT

AUGUST 1, 2033 · THE NEW ORLEANS MUDCATS BEAT

Smith finally arrives; Mudcats one game off the line

BY **THÉO DELACROIX** · TIMES-CRESCENT

In January Ryan paid Jimmy Smith $27.5 million for one year, and in March the man tore his labrum before he had thrown a pitch that counted, and through April and May and June and most of July that contract sat on the books of this club like a chair kept empty at a family table. I wrote in May that he should be back in June. He was not. He made five starts at Baton Rouge with a 0.61 earned run average, and this month he came home. Three starts, 18 and two-thirds innings, a 1.93, two wins. It took him a long time.

The club he came back to is 50-55. It is tied with Galveston for fourth in the Jade, 14 games behind Denver, and one game behind Tampa Bay for the last playoff place in the Ice Conference, with Rochester a game ahead of that. In May I said this club had not decided what it was, and neither had I. Fifty-seven games later neither of us has. It is 26-31 since I wrote that. It has never been more than four games above .500. It has never been more than six below. Twenty-three and 21 in one-run games. That is 44 one-run games in 105, and I have sat through most of them.

The arm that has held it up all summer is Joe Barnes. He went to the All-Star Game, the only Mudcat who did. He has a 3.03 and 147 strikeouts in 127 and two-thirds innings, the first year of the five-year deal, and he has been worth it. Jugurtha Kimya missed time and came back, 14 starts, a 2.49, 85 strikeouts and 15 walks, and at 24 he is the best thing that has happened to this rotation since 2017.

Behind those two the music thins. The club has allowed 145 home runs, third-most in baseball. Tony Orduna is at 4.96 and Bill Dixon at 4.62. The bullpen has a 4.14, 28th, and 19 blown saves, tied for second-most in the league. Joel King has 25 saves on his $20 million, and he also has a 3.86 and six losses. Paulino Ozment, on the minimum, has a 2.51 in 79 innings, and he has been better than anyone behind him in the box score.

The bats do a little of everything and not enough of any of it. Paul Woolsey, who was a surprise in May, is no longer one: .308 with 13 home runs in 61 games. Mark Williams is at .293 with 23 stolen bases. Joe Harris, the signing I could not square in March, has 17 home runs and hit five of them in one sim. Andy Chenault has come back from .211 to .241. He is 28, and I have stopped worrying about him, I think. Pat Vargas has 35 stolen bases. Travis Williams, 35, three Platinum Sticks, is hitting .190, and I watch him every night and remember. Jose Figueroa has a sore shoulder and is out about six weeks. The club has drawn fewer walks than any team in baseball.

So there is the question for Ryan, and it is a hard one for a man who has never in 26 seasons had to rebuild. Smith and King, $47.5 million between them, are one-year deals. They run out in October either way. The club is one game out of October itself, in a division where only Denver is over .500, and it is 11-17 against the other conference. A club in that position can tell itself almost anything.

Below it, Gulfport is 64-29, the best thing in Double-A. Michael Herr is hitting .303 with 16 home runs there and is 43rd on the game's Top 100. Logan Shattuck is 55th, Tom Lopez 90th and Kevin Zaragoza 97th. Those are four names, and they are not 2033 names.

Three in San Juan, then Southland and Memphis at home. In a year that keeps coming out even, I would not expect anything else.