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North Stars sell to Denver, still hold playoff spot

BY **ADA BRIGHTBILL** · ROCHESTER POST-EXPRESS

The franchise's payroll on May 23 was $209.2 million, the highest in the league. On August 1 it is $129.2 million, 22nd. The difference is the July 4 trade with Denver. Vince Hernandes, Lyle Egner and Jorge Garcia went west, with Rochester keeping half of what Egner is owed. Denver sent back its first- and second-round picks in 2034 and 2035, a 2035 third, and three prospects: Ryan Hamaker, Luis Quinones and Odilon Keating.

In April I asked Keven whether this was the year for the title he wanted before the core got old. "It certainly must be," he said. On July 4 he traded three of the regulars who were hitting. On July 18 he added to it, sending Mark Campbell, who had a 1.21 earned run average and five saves, to Huron for a 2035 third-round pick and Rob Mae, a Triple-A first baseman.

The record on May 23 was 26-22. It is 52-53, second in the Jade by default, 12 games behind Denver. Here is the part I would not have predicted: it is also seventh of 16 in the Ice, one game clear of Tampa Bay, and holding a playoff spot. The club Keven took apart is 10-11 since the day he did it. I have covered this organization since its first day, and I have not seen a club sell and then hold its place.

Jeff Williams is why. He is 25, on the minimum, and this is the season he is having: .325 with a .409 on-base percentage, a .607 slugging percentage and 28 home runs. He was Batter of the Month for May and for June and player of the week twice. He went to the All-Star Game alone from this club. Everything else on this roster now depends on him.

Around him the money is what it was. Tim Liddick, in the first year of his five-year, $180 million extension, is hitting .224 with six home runs. Dave Smith, $22 million, is at .206. Eric Story is at .224 with

three home runs in 377 plate appearances. The club still strikes out less than any team in baseball, 705 times, and it is 26th in runs. Alex Rojo strained a knee ligament on July 18.

The pitching has become a thing I have not seen in 22 years of covering this franchise. Rochester's starters have thrown 382 innings. Its relievers have thrown 553. Josh Barrett has pitched 113 innings without making a start, 7-7 with a 3.35. Danny Alanis has pitched 104 and a third the same way, with a 2.85. Joey Reek, the two-time Pitcher of the Year, is 7-8 with a 3.40 and 149 strikeouts. He signed through 2037. He is what the next good Rochester club starts with, along with Williams.

As for the farm, read the standings. Triple-A Los Angeles is 48-45. Below that, San Francisco is 36-57, Memphis 27-54, Fort Worth 22-59, El Paso 4-24 and Portland 3-25. I have written about that system for 20 years and those are the numbers. Mike Davis is 94th on the game's Top 100, at Memphis, the only name there. Keating, 18, from the Denver trade, hit .397 at Portland and has moved up to El Paso. Andy Brady has 20 saves at Los Angeles.

Which is the point of that July trade, and I can see it from here. The system had nothing, and on July 4 it got two first-round picks, two seconds and a third. I covered 2019 in Winston-Salem, and I know how long it takes to come back from nothing. I do not expect Keven to say the word "rebuild." I do expect the club's own transactions to say it for him.

The club was swept in Phoenix to close the sim and is 4-6 in its last 10. Three in Southland, then Virginia and Milwaukee at home.