RICHMOND DISPATCH-LEDGER

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Rebels slug, can't pitch; Kaden says season looks lost

BY **BO THREADGILL** · RICHMOND DISPATCH-LEDGER

The 24th of July, in Chicago, the third game of a three-game set. The Rebels had come into that series with a chance to do something about a bad month, and they left it swept, by a club with the smallest payroll in baseball. That night they were 39-60. I have covered this franchise since 2010, and I know what that number means. In March this city thought it had a team that could play in November. It has a team that will play through September and go home.

I asked Kaden whether it was time to sell. He had told me he would need to be within three to five games of a wild card spot to stay in it. They had just lost five straight.

> *"I'm going to level with the fans, this is not looking good," he said. "But I am not going to use the word 'rebuild.' I will say this season looks lost, but we'll sell off the spare parts and be back next year. More of a re-tool."*

I have seen a lot of general managers try to find a way to say that. That is a plain way to say it, and I respect it.

The Rebels are 42-63, tied with New York and Memphis for the worst record in baseball, 20 games behind Milwaukee and 13 behind the last playoff spot in the Fire. They went 7-17 in July. In May I told you this club was 19-29 with time, and then it won seven straight, from the 22nd to the 29th of May, and for one week it looked as though 2031 might be coming around again. It has gone 17-34 since.

I wrote about 2031 once more in that May piece, and I know what people say about that. On the last day of August that year this club was 60-69. It will not be 60-69 this August 31.

The trouble is not hard to find, and it never was. Virginia hits. It is second in baseball in slugging percentage and OPS, third in batting average and on-base percentage, 11th in runs. Chris Schmotzer, Pio Takami and Jesus Sifuentes all went to the All-Star Game. Tim Hart has 23 home runs and 76 runs batted in, third in the league, and he is hitting .223. Ben Becker has 20 home runs in 311 plate appearances, on $2.2 million. This is a real lineup.

The pitching is 32nd of 32. The staff earned run average is 4.93, down from 5.53 in May, and it has still allowed 538 runs, the most in baseball. The starters are 31st and the bullpen is last. Ken Henderson has 151 strikeouts and a 4.81. Phil Church has 150 and a 4.17, and he has walked 69. Rocky Gerling is at 5.04. Curt Graham has 14 saves and is 0-5. Kaden said in April that he had faith Church and Henderson would figure it out. They have not gotten far enough.

Then the part that will trouble me most this winter. The farm. I went down the list of affiliates this week: Peninsula, Johnson City, Lynchburg, Shenandoah, Chattanooga, New Castle. Six clubs, six last places. Lynchburg is 20-61 and Shenandoah 23-58. Jim Gaudreau is 59th on the game's Top 100, hitting .196 at Chattanooga, and Enrique Guzman is 69th. Francisco Benavides has 16 home runs at Peninsula. That is where "back next year" has to come from, or else it has to come from a trade.

I asked Kaden about the one thing he can be sure of. Schmotzer is 24, hitting .291 with a .389 on-base percentage and 16 home runs.

> *"Chris is not moving," Kaden said. "He will be here for next season, and hopefully a hell of a lot longer. He's the face of our team right now."*

He is. I was in the building for the 2025 ring, and I can tell you that a franchise can go a long way on a face like that. It is a long way from a re-tool to a parade, but this town has made that walk before.

Tampa Bay comes in for three. Then Rochester and Fort Collins on the road.