LA PRESSE SPORTIVE

OCTOBER 6, 2033 · THE MONTREAL MACHINE BEAT

Machine win nine straight, finish 94-68, host Philadelphia

BY **ÉTIENNE CHARBONNEAU** · LA PRESSE SPORTIVE

The first frost came to the lawns along the river this week, a little early, and the club came home from Philadelphia on Wednesday night to a city that has started wearing its coats. It is the fourth October in a row. For twenty years I did not get to write that once. I have now written it four times, and I notice it has not become easier to believe, only easier to type.

In August I said I was prepared to call this a better team than a good baseball team, and no more than that, for another month. The month is over. Ninety-four and 68, second in the Sapphire, four games behind Somerville, the third seed in the Ice and the home side in the Wild Card Series. That is a good team. I am told it was one in June as well.

It found its best stretch late. On September 16 Montreal lost 7-1 at home to New York and stood third in the division, behind Boston. Then it won nine straight: 9-0 and 8-4 over New York, three in Chicago, three at home against Toronto, among them a 1-0 win behind Sam Kelly, and a 6-5 win over Baltimore on September 26. By that night the club was 91-63 and four games behind Somerville with eight to play, which was as close as anyone was going to get. I asked Josh in September whether the goal was still the division. The answer arrived without him: Somerville clinched it on October 2.

The pitching was what it was all summer, only thinner. The staff allowed 599 runs, third-fewest in baseball, and the starters' earned run average, 3.35, was second. Kelly finished 17-9 with a 2.75 and 246 strikeouts, tied for the most wins in the league and second in strikeouts, on $4.5 million. He was not quite the same pitcher after the deadline. Elbow inflammation in a start against Chicago here on August 26 cost him nine days, and he gave up 13 home runs in his last 11 starts. Jong-su Im had a 2.28 in his last 11. T.J. Larson

made five starts at 2.23. John Kropp, whose 13 and two-thirds scoreless innings I asked Josh about, finished at 3.32.

The bullpen has two men I would trust with the city's last good bottle of wine. Arturo Luna, 33, on $1.1 million, finished with a 0.94 earned run average in 77 innings and 59 games. Dave Santillan finished with 34 saves and a 1.68, and after the deadline he had 11 saves and a 1.37. Behind them it is not so tidy. The club blew 23 saves this year. Dave Roughton had an 8.62 after the deadline. Greg Tarver, 39, the man in this field with the most October wins, gave up five home runs in 12 and a third innings. Alex Drew damaged an elbow ligament against Somerville in mid-September and is out for about a year.

The injuries took a catcher and moved the infield around. Pete Troiano was lost for the season in August. Dean Salvucci strained a muscle in his side in mid-August and played 31 games after the deadline, at .204. He still hit 32 home runs, and he still walked enough to get on base at .329, which I have stopped trying to make sense of. Ryan Weigold strained the same muscle on August 27 and has not played since. Willie Solis carried the lineup in their absence: .294 after the deadline with 13 home runs, 32 on the year and 98 runs batted in, on the minimum. Yuigo Sakaguchi hit .301 over the same stretch. And Jon Morales, the third baseman I wrote in August was where hits went to die, hit .298 after the deadline and went 5-for-5 in the 11-10 win on the last day of the season.

Philadelphia, then. We have never met them in October. They won the season series, 7-5, and two of the three games in Philadelphia this week, 5-1 and 4-3, before the 11-10 game. We outscored them 53-41 across the 12. They are the best one-run team in the league at 29-16, and our bullpen is the thing that wins and loses one-run games. Philadelphia won its only title in 2001, the league's first season. Ours came in 2005.

Games 1 and 2 are here on the 7th and 8th, and the club was 55-26 in this building this year, tied for the best home record in the league. I have looked for a reason for that all summer and found only that it is so.