

PHILADELPHIA BULLETIN

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Eagles clinch first October since 2017, open in Montreal

BY **FRANK IACOBELLI** · PHILADELPHIA BULLETIN

The last time this club played in October, in 2017, I was writing these columns on a laptop that weighed as much as a cinder block, and Nick Henson had just won his third straight Pitcher of the Year. I have written a lot of Septembers since then. I had stopped saving the one where I got to write this.

The Eagles are in. They finished 83-79, fourth in the Sapphire, the second wild card in the Ice, and they clinched it here on September 28 with a 3-0 win over New York. Fifteen Octobers went by without them. In March I did not expect much. I said so. I would like the record to show that I was happy to be wrong, and that I was wrong by a good distance.

It did not come easily, and it did not come on the road. In September I asked Connor whether the club could hold a five-game lead with 12 of its last 21 away from home, where it was 27-42. It went 5-7 in those 12. It lost 1-3 in 18 innings in Toronto on September 16, the longest game I have watched in a while and not the one I would have chosen. It lost the next two there as well. Then it went to Baltimore and Boston and won four of six, three of them by a run, one of those in 13 innings, and that was the race. The club finished 51-30 at home and 32-49 everywhere else. I still can't give you a reason. I have stopped needing one.

What kept it upright was the close game. Philadelphia went 29-16 in one-run games this year, the best in baseball. Ricky Magolan finished with 38 saves, fifth in the league, and after the deadline he converted 15 of 16. Freddie Pritchard, at 3.31, and Bill Carstensen, at 3.13, two of the veterans Connor signed in January on one-year deals, held the middle innings most nights. I spent the winter worrying about those signings. They were fine.

The rotation held up too, once it was whole again. Bill Crum came back from his abdominal strain and made seven starts after the deadline with a 2.06 earned run average. He finished 12-9 with a 2.89. Roberto Garcia went 6-1 with a 2.30 in his last 11 starts. Bobby Bumby went 0-7 in his last 11 with a 4.36, which tells you mostly about the runs he got. Mike Shealy, 35, who struck out his 2,000th man in July, gave the club 42 innings after the deadline, three starts among them, and 56 more strikeouts.

And now, if you will allow an old man one, a word about Mike Dunfee. In May I bragged about him. In August I took a little of it back. In September I asked Connor whether Dunfee was playing every day. He was, and he hit .313 after the deadline with 14 home runs and a .590 slugging percentage. On October 4 against Montreal he played his 1,500th big-league game. He is 34. I have always liked the old guys, and every few years one of them pays me back.

The rest of the lineup hits the ball out of the park and not much else, which is fine in a short series. Armando Jaramillo hit 36 home runs and drove in 97. Matthew Ryan hit 30 and .184, and I have run out of ways to describe that. J.P. Schall, 25, hit 24. Alfonso Cordova played shortstop in 158 games and stole 30 bases. The club hit 212 home runs, fifth in baseball, and drew the second-most walks.

Montreal won 94 games and is the third seed. We are the sixth. We have never met them in October. We won the season series, 7-5, and two of the three here last week, 5-1 and 4-3, before losing 11-10 on the last day. They outscored us across the year, 53-41. Games 1 and 2 are in Montreal on the 7th and 8th, and they were 55-26 at home. Games 3, 4 and 5 are here, where we were 51-30.

This franchise won the league's first title, in 2001, my second month on the beat. I was 38. I did not know enough to know how rare it was. I know now. Connor has been in the chair three seasons, and he has already given this town the one thing it has not had since 2017. Whatever happens in Montreal, that part is done.