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North Stars go 4-17 late; 10-year October run ends

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

For the record, since this paper keeps one: Rochester went to the postseason in 2023, its first year under this name, and in every year after that through 2032. Ten straight. Seven division titles, three championships. On October 3 the club lost 7-2 at home to Tampa Bay, and the next morning it was mathematically out. The streak is over at ten.

The club finished 75-87, tied with Cincinnati for fourth in the Jade. On the night of September 11 it was 71-70, tied for second, and five games clear of the first club out of a playoff spot in the Ice. It went 4-17 from there. Four of the 10 losses in the sim that began September 12 were by a run, two of them in 13 innings. It lost three straight at home to Cincinnati, two of three in Las Vegas, three straight in Fort Collins, two of three in Denver, and then three straight at home to New Orleans by a combined 15-1. I have seen this franchise lose 117 games in Winston-Salem. I had not seen it lose like this in Rochester.

In September I asked Keven whether he sold too soon. Here is the arithmetic. On July 4 he sent Vince Hernandes, Lyle Egner and Jorge Garcia to Denver. Hernandes hit .296 with 14 home runs there. Rochester's lineup finished 27th in runs. In April Keven told me this had to be the year. On July 4 he decided it was not. Both of those were defensible. The second one is the one that finished the season.

What the club got for it is a ledger I will be writing about for five years: Denver's first- and second-round picks in 2034 and 2035, a 2035 third-rounder, and three prospects, Ryan Hamaker, Odilon Keating and Luis Quinones. Mike Davis is still the only Rochester name on the game's Top 100 at the end of the season, at 86th, at Memphis. I said in August that the club's transactions would say "rebuild" before Keven did. They have.

Jeff Williams is what is left, and it is a great deal. He is 25. He led the league with 47 home runs, hit .323 with a .400 on-base percentage and a .615 slugging percentage, and drove in 117. He was the Ice Conference Batter of the Month for September at .354 with 10 home runs, and the player of the week on October 3, six home runs in 24 at-bats. On September 28 in Denver he hit three home runs in one game, and Rochester lost it 6-4. That is the season in one game. He makes the minimum. He goes to arbitration this winter, and the club controls him through 2035. In September I asked Keven whether he extends him. That is now the most important decision in this organization.

The pitching held up longer than the lineup did. Joey Reek finished 11-13 with a 3.16 and 222 strikeouts, sixth in the league, and he is signed through 2037. Danny Alanis went 12-7 with a 2.91 in 170 innings without making a start. Josh Barrett threw 176 innings the same way. Rochester's starters threw 604 innings this year, the fewest in baseball. That was the design. When the lineup stopped scoring in September the design had nothing to protect.

The money does not leave with the season. Tim Liddick, the catcher, is owed $36 million a year through 2037 and hit .223 with nine home runs. Dave Smith is owed $22 million next year and hit .202. Alex Rojo is owed $20 million next year. The club has $136.3 million committed for 2034 already, and most of it is for men who were not good enough this September.

I have covered this franchise since its first day, through 11 seasons in Winston-Salem and 11 in Rochester. I know what coming back from nothing looks like, because I watched it happen once. This is not nothing. It is Williams, Reek, two Denver first-rounders and a long wait.