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Rocks Ride Rough Waves in Second Half of 2016

Samir Duenez, Brandon Downes, Robert Pehl and Luis Villegas Highlight Second Half Power Surge

WILMINGTON, DE—It was an up and down year for the Wilmington Blue Rocks in a 2016 campaign that featured more downs than ups. Despite a 54-84 record overall that would set a new low for fewest wins in a season in franchise history, the Blue Crew refused to give up and finished off the season in style by taking five of their last seven games in the season's final road trip. Homers abounded in the final three games as the boys from Frawley clobbered a long ball in each of the contests, four total, to tie a season high for most consecutive games with a home run. It was an explosive ending to a second half and a season that would be most remembered for a team that continued to battle no matter how bad their luck was running.

The 2016 campaign for the Rocks did not go the way they hoped when they started the season. They set a new low for fewest wins in a season with 54, eclipsing the mark of 60 back in 2005. They also recorded their most losses in a year with 84, four more than the 80 lost by the 2005 club. The squad also collected the fewest first half wins with 27, one fewer than the 28 of last season. The 2016 Blue Crew set a new mark for fewest home wins by claiming victory in just 28 contests, four fewer than in 2014. They also tied for most road losses, dropping for 44 times away from Frawley Stadium for the second year in a row. The pitching staff also set a new high in team ERA, posting a 4.55 mark, which surpassed the 4.36 mark back in both 1997 and 2005. With a final wild pitch in the seventh inning, it marked the 162 of the year, 30 more than the prior record of 132 from 2013.

While a dearth of homers was a problem in the first half of the season, after the All-Star break the Rocks found the antidote. After hitting just 25 home runs in 69 games in the first half of the season, the Rocks smacked 37 long balls in the second half. They hit three homers on July 9, which tied for the most in any game by Wilmington in 2016. **Brandon Downes** (promoted to Triple-A in the final week of the season) led the club with 12 home runs (including two grand slams). **Austin Bailey** joined the homer parade on July 29, launching his first career Advanced-A long ball. It had been 82 games since the infielder had hit a home run with his last long ball coming against the Hagerstown Sun back on September 5, 2015. He followed that up with his first dinger from the right side in a game on August 27 versus Myrtle Beach. **Luis Villegas** also got in on the act on August 3 against Salem, hitting two yard balls. It was the catcher's first home run since August 31, 2015 with Low-A Lexington, and only the second two-homer performance by a Blue Rock in 2016. **Mike Hill** turned in the third two-dinger game on August 16 vs. the P-Nats, belting the first two dingers of his Advanced-A career. **Ryan O'Hearn** had the other multi-homer game on April 15 at Potomac). **Samir Duenez** also was monumental in the long-ball spike, with seven since joining the team at the All-Star break. He was promoted to Double-A in the second to last week of the season. **Robert Pehl** played along in the most crucial of moments. The utility man had not hit a home run the entire season before tattooing a three-run belt in the eighth inning of the second to last game of the season to break a 2-2 tie and propel the Rocks to a 5-3 victory. It was Pehl's first home run since July 24, 2015. Villegas came back to wallop two more blasts in the season finale, marking it

the fourth time in 2016 a Rock accomplished the feat and the first time by the same player. The home run total for the Blue Crew finished as follows: Downes finished as the leader with 12 while Duenez and O'Hearn tied with the next highest total of seven.

It was no coincidence the power surge coincided with the arrival of **Samir Duenez**. The burly yet quick bat got off to a roaring start and never stopped. He went 2-for-4 with a double and two RBI in his first game with the Blue Crew while down in Winston-Salem and kept on going. Through his first 24 games he clobbered six long balls, a triple, four total doubles, 20 RBI and scored 15 runs while adding six stolen bases. While he did hit a brief cold streak, all the Venezuelan first basemen did with the Rocks was hit .300 in 56 games. He drove in 42 runs, smashed seven homers, 13 doubles and two triples while also chipping in with 10 stolen bases in 12 attempts. For his efforts he was rewarded with a promotion to Double-A Northwest Arkansas in the final week of the regular season.

The beginning of July had plenty of fireworks for the Rocks and their opponents. Unfortunately it was the Blue Crew who was in the danger area of the blast zone on July 1 against the Dash. They ended up losing the game 18-5, which set a new record for most runs allowed in a Blue Rocks game. Prior to July 1, 2016, the most runs allowed by a Wilmington pitching staff was 16, which was done twice with the most recent occurring on June 2, 200 at Salem in a 6-5 loss. It also tied the record for most lopsided loss in the franchise's history. The boys from Frawley avenged that loss by putting up a 12 spot on Independence Day, highlighted by **Wander Franco's** grand slam (the Rocks would hit three on the season, with the other two coming courtesy of **Brandon Downes** on May 20, and August 16). It was the most lopsided victory for the Blue Crew on the season and Franco tied a franchise high in RBI with seven. Franco was the sixth Blue Rock in history to tally that number of RBI with the most recent coming courtesy of **Jack Lopez** at Frederick on May 11, 2013. The good feeling did not last though as the next night Wilmington lost 14-1 to mark the second time in five days that they tied the franchise record for most lopsided loss. 13-run defeats have now occurred six times in Wilmington history.

One of the most anticipated and sought after wins of the season came on July 8 against the Myrtle Beach Pelicans at Frawley Stadium. That is when **Zach Lovvorn** finally tossed the winless monkey off of his back. The Rocks starting pitcher entered that game with an 0-10 record, but a 3.51 ERA. He finally received his first win of the season thanks to one of his best outings on the year. The righty from Alabama went six innings and did not allow a single run, giving up just three hits while striking out six and walking two. He needed to be almost perfect too because the Blue Crew gave him just one run of support. The lone run that made the difference in the game came off of the bat of **Chad Johnson**. The left-handed catcher wanted to help out his pitcher and did so with his third long ball of the year (he would finish with five in 2016). Johnson waited on a 1-1 change-up and blasted it over the wall in right center and was the only run of the game. Lovvorn's luck got a little better, but not much as he finished the season 2-15, despite a 3.70 ERA that placed him sixth in the eight-team league.

One of the best pitching streaks of the season coincided with the Rocks longest win streak of the year. **Matt Tenuta** tied a team season high on August 19 when he notched his fourth straight win. Tenuta went 5.1 innings and gave up seven hits with just one unearned run on four strikeouts and a lone walk against the Mudcats. Over his five game span, he gave up just six earned runs in 30 innings pitched, which was good for a 1.80 ERA. During that time he also struck out 25 batters and issued just five free passes. The streak all started in Lynchburg on July 19 when the southpaw put together his most dominant outing of the year. Against the most powerful lineup in the Carolina League, Tenuta allowed just two hits through six shutout innings and walked a pair while setting a new season high in strikeouts with nine. The homestand was even better for the Blue Crew rotation. The team won six straight games overall, four from Potomac and two from Carolina in completing their only homestand sweep of the year. Rocks starting pitchers accumulated 36.0 innings pitched with the shortest outing belonging to **Derek Gordon**, who was on a 65-pitch limit and he did not allow a single run in four innings of work. The

starters allowed just eight runs with only five of those earned, good for a 1.25 ERA. The arms totaled 26 strikeouts in their six starts and issued just two free passes, by far their best six game total of the season.

However, their lowest point of the season immediately followed the perfect homestand. From August 23rd to the 28th, the Blue Crew went on their second six-game losing streak of the second half. The reason this particular streak was more painful than the previous one is because it coincided with the Rocks official elimination from playoff contention. Because of the boys from Frawley's inability to win the first-half crown for the second year in a row, they needed to either take home the second half championship or finish second with Lynchburg finishing first. It was fitting then that the Hillcats were the ones to officially end the Blue Rocks playoff hopes. That came in an 8-3 loss on August 24 when **Zach Lovvorn** was on the mound and marked his 15th defeat on the season. That loss tied him with former Blue Crew member and major leaguer **Jeremy Affeldt** for most losses in a single season in franchise history.

While knowing they were out of playoff contention might have disheartened some teams, it did not stop the Rocks when they embarked on their final six games of the season. They took two of three from Carolina and proceeded to go on the road to Frederick where they finished things off with wins in three of their final four. The highlight of the final road trip on the mound was the work of **Corey Ray** who ended his 2016 in style. The tall righty was one of the best pitchers in the Carolina League over his last five starts ranging from August 13 to September 4. In his penultimate start of the year, which took place in Game One of a doubleheader, the first-year Blue Rocks spun a masterful 6.2 scoreless innings and allowed just one hit before surrendering a solo bomb to end his outing one out shy of a complete game shutout. He bounced back though in his final start and after giving up just two unearned runs in 5.1 innings, it gave him just two total earned runs in his final five outings. But it was the strikeouts where he really made his mark. The Texan tied his season high in strikeouts on August 25 and 30, but went to the mound on September 4 in his final start and set a new high by punching out nine Frederick Keys. It was part of a span of 29 innings where he struck out 39 opposing batters and walked just 10. He went 2-0 during that time with a scintillating 0.62 ERA, dropping his earned run average from 5.55 to 4.13.

Pehl's first and only home run while dramatic should not have come as a surprise. The Swiss Army Knife finally got consistent playing time in the final month of the season and showed why he was one of the most underrated performers of the 2016 campaign. In a season where he played six different positions for first year manager **Jamie Quirk**, Pehl saved his best for last. He batted .371 in the month of August, with nine doubles, 12 RBI and a .464 on base percentage. He did not stop when the calendar turned over either. In addition to the game-winning home run in the penultimate game of the year when he drove in a total of four runs, the Washington State native went 11-for-25 in the seven game road trip with the homer, three doubles, two walks, 12 RBI and six runs scored.

Pehl was not the only boy from Frawley to show his pop at the tail end of the season. **Luis Villegas** saved his best for last... twice. The Venezuelan catcher made waves when he produced his best offensive game of his career on August 3 against Salem. In that outing the backstop whacked a two-run homer and a three-run blast to drive in five for the first time as a professional. He also added a solo belt on August 23 versus Lynchburg for his third long ball of the season. He proceeded to pick up three hits on August 28 while driving in a pair and scoring three times before collecting two more hits on the 30th and driving in a lone run while crossing the plate twice. In his final game of the season he became the first member of the Blue Crew to tally two multi-home run games on the year when he connected on not one, but two separate solo jacks in the Rocks 6-3 finale loss. The five total home runs tied him with not just **Wander Franco**, but whom else... fellow catcher **Chad Johnson**.