Miami needs a game before Charlotte comes to town

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Miami could sweep Charlotte at home next week and still finish the series in second place. Even after three straight losses in Minneapolis, the Colonels are 69–52 and lead the Hurricanes by four and a half games. Their next meeting is August 27 in Miami. Until then, somebody else has to beat Charlotte for the Hurricanes to close the gap.

Miami knows the price of letting a game get away against Charlotte. The last time they met, on July 26, the Hurricanes took a 4–1 lead into the bottom of the ninth. A single and a triple brought one run home. A sacrifice fly brought in another. With two outs and Miami still ahead 4–3, Nigel Hudson fouled off two pitches, then hit a two-run homer to win it for the Colonels. Charlotte finished the day eight games ahead.

Miami has taken three and a half games off that lead since then. It got one of them this week. While the Colonels were getting swept, Miami won the middle game of its series in San Diego, 4–0. Wednesday offered another opening. Charlotte lost 9–3, but the Hurricanes went into the ninth trailing 6–2. They scored twice and left San Diego with a 64–56 record.

Six games to change the margin

Both contenders have six games scheduled before they see each other. Miami plays four at Atlanta, then gets Tampa Bay twice at home. Charlotte plays four at Tampa Bay and two at Atlanta. The same two opponents stand between the contenders and their August 27 meeting. They have given them very different trouble.

The Kings have beaten Miami nine times in 15 meetings. In the last one, Miami led 4–1 going into the ninth. Atlanta tied it with three runs, and Gerardo Rodriguez homered to open the 11th for a 5–4 win. Charlotte, meanwhile, has gone 11–4 against Tampa Bay. The Hurricanes open Thursday against the club that took that July game away from them. To gain ground that night, they need help from the club Charlotte has beaten most often in the East.

Watch the two finals together on August 20. A Miami win in Atlanta and a Charlotte loss at Tampa Bay cut the lead to three and a half, small enough for Miami to pass Charlotte in a four-game series. Reverse those results and the lead grows to five and a half. The series in Miami is a week away. What it can settle is already being played for.