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Locals help Express get underway, near .500

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by **John Y. Wehmuller**
Staff Writer

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A year ago, Hans Falkenhan spent two months in what seemed like exile in upstate New York. So it was a pretty easy decision for him to spend this summer a little closer to home.

"Last summer was tough," the Blake High graduate said. "I was away from home and didn't really know anybody, other than the guys on the team. We were kind of like brothers; we hung out together. But around here, I still know some people back home and up at school, and the guys on the team also."

After playing for the Germantown Black Rox in the Clark C. Griffith Collegiate Baseball League in 2003, Falkenhan went north last summer to play in the New York Collegiate Baseball League. He found out the competition wasn't much better -- and the social scene much worse -- so the rising junior at Towson University is back in Montgomery County this summer.

Falkenhan is one of six local products anchoring the inaugural roster of the Rockville Express in the first-year Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League. After two weeks (and a stretch of seven games in six days), the Express is 4-5 and in a four-way tie 2 1/2 games back of the league lead.

Joining Falkenhan on the Rockville roster are Watkins Mill graduate Kyle Skellchock, his teammate at Towson; Bullis graduate Ryan Hannegan; Quince Orchard product Matt Beringer; and Rockville's own Matt Swissman, formerly of Wootton.

That homegrown talent provides a solid core for a team that boasts players from 10 different states.

"It's our first year," Express manager Tom Shaffer said. "We're just trying to find the best available players we could possibly find. At the same time, we're trying to mix some guys from the East Coast with the West Coast."

On Sunday, the Express split a doubleheader against the Maryland Orioles at Montgomery College-Rockville's Knights Field. The Express won the first game, 2-1, before dropping the second, 8-2.

Going into Sunday, Falkenhan was leading Rockville with a .308 batting average. Hannegan, who played for Shaffer this spring at MC-Rockville, had a team-leading .353 on-base percentage.

Falkenhan struggled at the plate Sunday, but for the most part, hasn't had too much trouble settling in. Three summers of wood-bat experience, combined with being back near home, have helped the 2002 All-Gazette first-teamer.

"I started off slow in my college season, then started picking it up at the end of the season and just kind of brought it in here," Falkenhan said. "I've kind of been used to the wood bats from playing the last two summers, so there wasn't too much to get used to."

It hasn't been quite so easy for some of the other county products. Beringer was touched for two runs in one inning in the second game Sunday, raising his ERA to 9.00. Skellchock, an All-Gazette pick in both 2002 and '03, and Swissman each saw their first game action Sunday.

"I've been working on the side on my command," Swissman said. "I was a local, and the coaches contacted me, and I wanted to join. ... I'm just trying to work hard and get better and play against tougher competition."

Swissman may have earned a little more work with Sunday's outing. He came on with two out in the seventh inning of the second game and held the Orioles scoreless the rest of the way. After an easy eighth, Swissman worked out of a bases-loaded jam in the top of the ninth.

The Wootton graduate is living at home this summer and hosting teammate Steve Braun, who is from California. Braun was selected by the Oakland Athletics in the 35th round of the Major League Baseball amateur draft earlier this month; his older brother, Ryan, was the fifth overall pick.

Swissman's tools aren't in the same category as the Braun brothers' -- many of his pitches Sunday were registering in the 70s on the radar gun. But he's used to that, and he knows what he has to do to be effective in the CRSL.

"I just have to concentrate on hitting my spots, keeping hitters off-balance and changing speeds," Swissman said. "My pitching coach just wanted me to go out there and throw strikes. He didn't want me to do too much, just let them hit it and let my fielders do the work. And that's what they did [Sunday]."

Notes: The Express hosted the College Park Bombers Tuesday in a game that finished too late for this edition. They visit the Bethesda Big Train Thursday.

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