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Two out of three leads to three out of four

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by **John Y. Wehmuller**
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After three road games in three days, the Rockville Express took advantage of a three-day break in the schedule early this week.

"Just spending some time away from the field," manager Tom Shaffer said.

The break came at a good time for the Express. Though the team lost its last game -- the second of a road doubleheader Saturday against the College Park Bombers -- it had won the three before that. Rockville (9-14) is still stuck at the bottom of the Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League standings, but the team can reflect this week on a 5-4 record in its last nine games.

"It doesn't help when you start 4-10," Shaffer said. "If we'd started 7-7 instead, we're looking at third place right now. We lost a few tough games at the beginning of the season. But we're fine. It's no big deal."

The first-year franchise enjoyed its first no-hitter last Tuesday, as three pitchers combined to shut down the league-leading Bethesda Big Train. Brian Tracy followed up Thursday by allowing just one hit in a 1-0 rain-shortened win over the Silver Spring-Takoma Thunderbolts. The Express then split its doubleheader with the Bombers, winning and losing by identical 5-1 scores.

Pitching and defense have combined to lead the way for the Express. Three Rockville pitchers -- Adam Haun, Adam Olbrychowski and Justin Segal -- will represent the team in the league's all-star game Monday at Ripken Stadium in Aberdeen.

So far, though, the pitching and defense have had to do it without too much help from the offense, which continues to struggle to find timely hits.

"Really, it's not going to just come around," Shaffer said. "Last week, we had a couple of off-days and guys were in to get extra work. They're adjusted to the wood bats by now. Guys are just struggling. That's not to say they're not good hitters."

R.J. Brown, another all-star, leads the team in hitting. He arrived late and was injured briefly, so Brown has played in only nine games. But in those games, he's hitting .281 with a home run and seven RBI. The team's next best hitter is Steve Braun, at .222.

Those numbers, and the team's overall record, look pretty underwhelming. But as the new kid on the block, the Express is just waiting for other teams to underestimate it.

"We're a first-year team. By everybody's standards, we're not supposed to be that much," Shaffer said. "That's fine by me."

As the team comes together on the field, the franchise itself is still under construction behind the scenes. Its Web site, www.rockvilleexpress.org, is now up and running, and the press box at Knights Field is just waiting for stairs to arrive before it is operational. Further field improvements -- lights being high on the agenda -- will likely have to wait until after the fall season at Montgomery College-Rockville.

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