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## Big-thinking league a product of past -- and future

 [E-Mail This Article](#)**by John Y. Wehmueller**  
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The sea of empty green seats at Ripken Stadium in Aberdeen Monday night was an apt metaphor for the nascent Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League's first season. The league has big potential and big ambitions but still a ways to go to fill them.

The league's inaugural All-Star Game Monday night drew only about 200 fans to the remote, albeit first-class, 6,000-seat facility in Harford County. Those 200 fans witnessed a 6-3 win by stars from Montgomery County-based teams over teams from the rest of Maryland. They also witnessed a microcosm of the league's roots and its future.

"Clearly, we're still in first-year mode a little bit," said Bethesda Big Train team president Bruce Adams, a driving force in founding the league. "My sense is that next year we'll feel a little bit more solid, and then by 2007 be ready for expansion. ... Like everything, it's a little tougher than we thought, but we're basically satisfied."

The idea for an all-Maryland league first came up late last summer at the All-American Amateur Baseball Association World Series in Johnstown, Pa. Adams, whose Big Train played in the Virginia-based Clark C. Griffith League, approached Dean Albany of the Eddie Brooks League's Maryland Orioles.

The result was a melding of three former Eddie Brooks teams -- the Orioles, Maryland Redbirds and College Park Bombers -- and two Clark Griffith teams -- the Big Train and Silver Spring-Takoma Thunderbolts, plus the new Rockville Express.

From a competitive standpoint, the marriage has been perfect. With just two weeks left in the regular season, all six teams are within seven games of the lead, something that would have been rare in both Eddie Brooks and Clark Griffith.

"The league's going great," Albany said. "You face good competition every day you play. When we talked before the season, we said, 'If everybody's 20-20, it will be a great league. ... It all turned out really balanced. We could play well and win in the old league. Now, if we don't play well, we lose. We're getting better by playing in this league.'"

**Laurie DeWitt/The Gazette**

**Cal Ripken Sr. League All-Star Game co-MVP R.J. Brown of the Rockville Express scores on a wild pitch during the sixth inning Monday night at Ripken Stadium in Aberdeen. The game pitted players from the three Montgomery County-based teams against the three teams from the rest of Maryland.**

Not only have the teams at the bottom of the standings been competitive, there is a noticeable balance in the standings between the two former leagues.

At the all-star break, the Orioles (18-10) led the Big Train (16-12) by two games. The Thunderbolts (11-12) and Bombers (12-13) were tied for third, and the Express (10-14) led the Redbirds (9-15) by a game for fifth. Clearly, there's no advantage to originally being from one league or the other.

"The way this all-star game went, it's been the most enjoyable, exciting one of these I've been to," Big Train manager Sal Colangelo said. "We thought Montgomery County versus Maryland would be an evenly matched game."

Sure enough, Monday showed just how even the split was. Both teams went hitless until Thunderbolts catcher Dan Hayden finally broke through for Montgomery in the bottom of the fourth. Maryland broke up Montgomery's perfect game in the fifth, scoring a run on two errors and two walks.

But the big blows came in the bottom of the sixth inning. Co-MVP Greg Lemon (Big Train) got things going with his second of three hits in the game, then scored on co-MVP R.J. Brown's (Express) two-run triple to center. Brown then scored on a wild pitch.

In the bottom of the eighth, Lemon doubled and Brown drove him in again. Lemon finished 3 for 4 with two runs scored. Brown went 2 for 2 with three RBI and one run scored. Justin Segal (Express) picked up the win; Josh Brown (Orioles) took the loss.

"I feel like this league is more competitive overall, that the talent level is higher overall," Lemon said. "It's a great advantage to play against guys of this caliber. You can only get better."

The league has had its share of successes off the field, as well, though it's there that the most work lies ahead. The CRSCBL doesn't want first-class facilities for its all-star game alone.

Several field situations are still up in the air. The Bombers lost their planned home, the University of Maryland's Shipley Field, to renovations this season, though that shouldn't be a problem next summer. The Baltimore-area Redbirds are also looking for a quality permanent home -- Adams said the current target is Towson University, an ideal site if it puts up lights. Lights for MC-Rockville's Knights Field, home of the Express, are also still in the works.

The league also continues to aim at a community-based, fan-friendly environment modeled on minor-league baseball. And it's on the lookout for new sites and new owners to spread that ideal and expand the league.

"Like Billy Ripken said, we have the potential, with this community atmosphere, to rival the Cape Cod League," Colangelo said. "That's the goal."

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