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Express is right in mix

July 27, 2005
John Y. Wehmueller
Staff Writer

The first-year Rockville Express have spent the entire Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League season in either fifth or sixth place in the six-team league standings. They're still there with just a week left in the regular season, but don't look now -- Rockville is just 1 1/2 games out of third place.

"We match up pretty well with everybody," manager Tom Shaffer said. "We've just gotta get to the playoffs, and everybody starts 0-0."

The Express (13-18) went 3-4 last week, splitting three doubleheaders and dropping their only single game to the Bethesda Big Train. With the Big Train and Maryland Orioles running away with the top two spots in the standings, that was good enough to bring Rockville within striking distance of the third-place Silver Spring-Takoma Thunderbolts (13-15).

The Orioles, currently in first, will not be around for the league playoffs, choosing instead to play in the All-American Amateur Baseball Association's World Series. The leaves a five-team playoff, with the bottom two seeds squaring off in a play-in game before the double-elimination rounds begin.

With nine games still to play, the Express' goal is to get out of the play-in game. They're only a half-game back of the Baltimore-based Maryland Redbirds, who currently sit fourth in the league (third for playoff purposes).

Rockville can thank its pitching staff for keeping it in the race. Starters Adam Olbrychowski and Adam Haun, who represented the Express in the league's All-Star game last week, give the team a quality start every time out. That, and Rockville's bullpen depth, have Shaffer confident the team can handle the coming stretch of more than a game per day.

"We got through this week, with seven games in five days, pretty well," Shaffer said. "If our starter goes four or five innings, we're fine. That's one bonus we have going into the playoffs. That's what other teams don't have."

What the Express can't afford to do is fall behind, because the offense continues to find the going tough. As of last week, the Express were holding opponents to a .218 batting average, but had only a .187 team average themselves.

First baseman/designated hitter R.J. Brown continues to be the exception. Brown, also an All-Star, had another exceptional week, raising his season average to near the .300 mark.

Brown has been so good that Shaffer has moved the slugger into the leadoff spot. It's not the traditional place for the beefy Brown, but it has one big advantage.

"We're just trying to get him as many at-bats as possible," Shaffer said. "He's really not a leadoff guy, we just put our

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best hitter first. ... We just want to get him up there five or six times a game, and he'll come away with two or three hits."

Brown and the Express visited the Maryland Bombers Tuesday in a game that finished too late to be included in this edition. They visit the Orioles Wednesday at 7 p.m. in Baltimore.



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