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## Local teams all eyeing league title

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The Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League playoffs start on Thursday, and now is the time to set lineups and pitching matchups to maximize the team's life in the short season. That is, unless the team is the Silver Spring-Takoma Thunderbolts, who have five games left to play and two days in which to play them.

"It is tough to even focus on the playoffs," manager Bobby St. Pierre said. "We have to play so many games, and there is a chance that we could fall into the play-in game [between the fourth and fifth seeds on Thursday]. We don't know where we are going to be, so it has been hard to focus on the playoffs. That has been unfortunate."

Mother Nature is largely to blame. Games that were rained out earlier in the season were rescheduled as doubleheaders towards the end. The result was a schedule in which the Thunderbolts played sporadically the first part of the season and almost constantly towards the end. That has been one of the major reasons for their inconsistency of late. On Sunday, they dropped both ends of a doubleheader to the Rockville Express before sweeping a doubleheader against the Maryland Redbirds on Monday night. Once in sole possession of third place, the Thunderbolts (17-18 through Monday) have dropped into a tie for third with the Express (19-20).

"Some days the offense is off; some days it's the pitching or the defense," St. Pierre said. "Our guys will have to play a lot down the stretch, and we'll be looking to hang in there. Justin McClanahan [.355 batting average, 18 runs batted in] and Andrew Greene [.328, 8 RBI] have been offensive sparkplugs for us. If we get a chance to catch our breath and regroup, we'll be OK."

The Rockville Express, on the other hand, is feeling pretty good right about now. Midway through the season, the team's record stood at 7-14 and things were looking grim for the last-place team. Then, the Express got hot. Over its last 18 games, the Express has gone 12-6. If Rockville defeated Silver Spring-Takoma on Tuesday night (a game that ended too late to be included in this edition), it will almost certainly clinch the second seed in the upcoming playoffs, as well as meet a team goal of finishing .500 in the regular season.

"When we were in last place, we talked about how it is a long season," Rockville manager Tom Shaffer said. "There are a lot of games to play. We had to peak at the right time, and I think that's what we're doing right now."

Part of the reason for Rockville's resurgence has been the consistent hitting of the top three batters in its order. RJ Brown (.329, 2 home runs, 16 RBI) and Scott Blackwood (.351, 7 RBI) have paced the Express attack. In addition, third baseman Mike Murphy, a sophomore at the University of Maryland and a Rockville native, is hitting .295.

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"We all get to start fresh in the playoffs, so it is a matter of where we end up," Shaffer said. "We're going to take this thing game by game, pitch by pitch. The team that is hot is going to win it, so I think we have a chance. I don't think anybody is too excited to face us."

One team that has had success all season, however, is the Bethesda Big Train. They are currently 24-15 and at the top of the CRSCBL standing by a half-game over the Maryland Orioles. A win on Tuesday over the College Park Bombers will secure the regular-season title. In addition, Bethesda has clinched the No. 1 seed in the playoffs, as the Orioles opted to defend their All-American Amateur Baseball Association national championship rather than participate in the league playoffs.

"I like our chances," Big Train manager Sal Colangelo said. "We have been successful because we have found a way to battle all year. Our kids know how to win. They come from good [college baseball programs] and they have bought into our system."

Bethesda's victory over Rockville on Monday proved that. It used timely hitting, aggressive baserunning and solid defense to outlast the Express, 7-4, in 10 innings. In the process, the Big Train, which won the Montgomery Cup with a 10-6 record against Montgomery County opponents, gave the hottest team in the league something to think about.

"Sure, we are trying to send a message," Colangelo said. "I think we have a very good team here."

The Big Train's success stems from outstanding starting pitching. Derek Caldwell (1.26), Dustin Pease (1.56) and Ron Lowe (1.61) all have earned-run averages less than 2.00, and overall, opponents are hitting just .262 against Bethesda's staff. On the offensive side, University of San Francisco's Jonnie Knoble has paced the team, earning the starting centerfield position for the Montgomery squad in the league's all-star game last month, as well as hitting .476 (10 for 21) last week. With only one game left before the playoffs, Colangelo will have a rested and well-stocked arsenal.

"It's been our character to battle all season," he said. "We wanted to win the Montgomery Cup, and we did. We are close to winning the regular-season title, and we want to fulfill our last goal, which is to win the championship."

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