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Hot Express steams toward playoffs on a winning streak

Wednesday, July 26, 2006

by John Y. Wehmueller
Staff Writer

Just how hot is the Rockville Express? It took the team a single weekend to run off four straight wins in the Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League.

"We've been playing pretty good baseball," Express manager Tom Shaffer said. "Kind of like everybody else, we played eight games in six days last week, and six games the previous week. When you go 4-2 one week and 6-2 the next, that's not too bad."

The crowning achievement came last weekend, with back-to-back doubleheader sweeps Saturday against the Maryland Orioles and Sunday against the Silver Spring-Takoma Thunderbolts. The pitching staff bore the burden well — Saturday's starters for the Express (23-14), Justin DeFratus in game one and Ryan Huston in game two, each went the distance, keeping the bullpen fresh.

DeFratus allowed one run and struck out five over his seven innings, winning 3-1. Huston followed up by scattering 11 hits in a 6-3 victory. On Sunday, four pitchers combined for a 6-5 win before southpaw Nathan Perlitsch shut the door over six-plus innings in a 3-1 win in the nightcap. Daniel Kennedy pitched the final inning to earn the save.

"We have a lot of pitching on this team," Perlitsch said. "We have our set starters, but there are always guys willing to come in and pick us up if we get into any trouble or anything like that, so I wasn't worried at all."

Perlitsch worked out of some minor jams early on Sunday, but bore down over his last four innings, allowing only a solo home run to Thunderbolts designated hitter Tim Park (Good Counsel High). His teammates picked him up with two runs in the top of the fifth and a solo home run by first baseman Eric Oliver in the sixth.

Rockville got a well-deserved break Monday and Tuesday, while it watched the rest of the league catch up on makeup games. Through Monday's games, the Express were just one game behind the first-place Bethesda Big Train and 1.5 games up on the third-place Orioles.

"We knew we had two days of rest coming, so we just tried to pick it up for these two days of doubleheaders we had," Oliver said. "Taking two from [the Orioles] was huge. [Sunday] was huge, too, getting those extra wins in and trying to get up on the Big Train."

More important than catching the Big Train is holding onto one of the top two spots at the end of the regular season. The league champion will be decided in the playoffs, which begin Monday and include all six teams. The bottom four will play twice Monday, once in the

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afternoon and once at night. The top two seeds get a “bye” and await the afternoon winners in the night games. The double-elimination tournament will crown its winner either next Wednesday or Thursday, depending on results.

Rockville’s last three games include one against the Big Train Wednesday and one against the Orioles Thursday. The Express closes its regular season Saturday against the last-place Maryland Redbirds.

“Any time you don’t have to play in first round is pretty good,” Shaffer said. “We’re not gunning for anybody, we just want to do what we have to do. The way we’re playing now, I’m confident we can beat anybody.”

Perlitsch agreed.

“We’re stoked; we really want to win it this year,” he said. “We just went 6-2 this week playing eight games in six days, so we’ve got a good adrenaline flow going. Hopefully we can carry that for the rest of the season.”

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