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Ripken League: Play ball

by Dan Greenberg | Staff Writer

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Now in its third year of existence, the seven-team Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League is becoming a place where collegiate athletes from around the county can hone their skills in the summer before returning to their college coaches in the fall. Players are often used at multiple positions in what is basically a two-month league, and most teams occasionally use field players as pitchers. With such a limited time with their roster, coaches know their top priority is simply to make everyone better.

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But they also want to win. And it just so happens that the Ripken League's three Montgomery County teams — the Bethesda Big Train, Rockville Express and Silver Spring-Takoma Thunderbolts — have done just that. A year ago, the Big Train led the league, which then included six teams, with a 28-12 record. The Express finished second during the regular season with a 25-15 record and also advanced to the league championship game. But it was the Thunderbolts who took home the title, thanks to a 5-3 victory over Rockville in the final.

“A lot of managers, when they talk, will basically say the same things about getting players better, but deep down inside, we all want to win,” said Rockville Express manager Tom Shaffer, also at the helm of Montgomery County-Rockville. “I’m a college coach, so I know all about that. It looks good on paper to say it, but the reality with the Rockville Express, at the end of the day, we’re confident that what we do as an organization will win ball games. If you don’t, you don’t keep your job.”

As the season kicks off this Friday, all three county teams are counting on the same thing: getting better individually, but winning collectively.

Silver Spring-Takoma

Last season did not go particularly well for the Thunderbolts, until the very end. With a 14-26 overall record, it took winning four of their five playoff games to win the title.

First-year manager John Duffy doesn’t plan on getting started so late this time around. He may not know his personnel as well as former manager Bobby St. Pierre, who is now a pitching coach with the Kansas City Royals minor-league affiliate Burlington Bees. But he does know that the talent is there to repeat.

“Obviously, my main goal is to win the championship,” said Duffy. “The first few weeks, I’m going to try and give everybody a chance to see who can do what, but by mid-July, I’ll have a good idea of what they all can do. By that time, we’ll be able to giddy-up and roll out a more consistent lineup to try and win every night out.”

Offensively, the Thunderbolts have several key bats to replace. Their top three hitters from a

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year ago — Corey Greene, Charlie Lenhard and Nick Popp — are all gone. So they will turn to several newcomers to spearhead the attack.

In the outfield, Wingate junior Nick Siega-Riz projects to be one of the team's top threats. A left-handed hitter who can play all three outfield spots, he brings quickness and some pop to the club, and should hit near the top of the order. Maryland-Baltimore County junior Joe Fowler will also bring power to the middle of the lineup, and Duffy expects him to be one of the top run-producers. He will split time in the outfield and at second base.

Jeff Jones is the top returning Silver Spring-Takoma hitter, and may eventually round out the starting outfield. Another noteworthy name is Harold Baines Jr., whose father starred for 22 years in the majors.

Michael Parker, a junior at Wingate, leads the infield. He batted second for the Bulldogs this past season, right behind Siega-Riz. He brings a crafty left-handed stroke as well as some range at shortstop. Returnee Joe Maca, a sophomore at Catholic, will be a utility player for the Thunderbolts, and could literally play everywhere on the infield. Though just 5-foot-7 and 150 pounds, Marcus Rose should bring quickness to second base, where he could become a regular starter.

Behind the plate will be Gerardo Hernandez, an all-star catcher for the team a season ago. Good Counsel graduate Tim Park will also be in the lineup every day, and be the Thunderbolts' best bat. But he won't catch, according to Duffy, because he caught all year at William & Mary. Instead, he will see time in left field, at first base or designated hitter.

“We've got a lot of good guys on our infield,” said Duffy. “We've got a lot of guys that can do a lot of different things, which is always a huge advantage. I'm a big believer in keeping everybody fresh and match-ups, so having a lot of versatile players is important.”

The pitching staff may be the team's biggest question mark. Two crucial returnees include right-handed arms Andrew Germuth and Dan Blewett, both of whom are probably starters.

Incoming lefty Jake Laber brings a 95 mile-per-hour fastball from North Dakota State, while Patrick Henry (Va.) Community College right-hander Josh Joseph should also see starts. The closer spot appears to go to Zak Laws, a starter for the squad last year who was turned into a reliever at Wingate.

Bethesda

The Big Train have won the Ripken League's regular-season title two years running, and shared the 2005 tournament crown with the Thunderbolts. They don't return as many familiar faces as in years past, but similar results are anticipated.

“We always have high expectations here with the Big Train,” said manager Sal Colangelo. “But I do think it's going to be a pretty balanced league this year. In general, a lot of teams are going to be stuck at about 20-20 or so. Between us, Rockville, Silver Spring. Plus, I think the [Maryland] Redbirds are going to be the surprise of the summer.”

Some mainstays do return for Bethesda. Steven Leach is a utility player who started 39 games a year ago, and will see plenty of time at both shortstop and third. Three key arms return, as well. Evan Frederickson is a 6-6 lefty and a potential top-round draft pick, of whom Colangelo says “has a million dollar arm.” Keith Moreland, who had Tommy John surgery last July, is back topping out at 93 mph. Brian Anderson is also back after throwing nearly 30 scoreless innings in the bullpen for the Big Train last year.

With those three as the foundation, Bethesda's pitching staff could be the best in the league. Right-hander Ben Toodle brings a mid-90s fastball from Jacksonville State, and went 6-3 in his freshman season with the Gamecocks. Mike Matta will close for the Big Train, and also brings an impressive resume, as he topped Mount St. Mary's with a 2.37 earned run average in his freshman season, picking up four wins while also leading the club with eight saves.

The infield is largely new, but has some talent. Second baseman Bert Smith was a top-five draft pick, named a Louisville Slugger Freshman All-American, and hit .359 in his sophomore season at Jacksonville State. He also stole



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31 bases for the Gamecocks, and he will bring speed to the leadoff spot for Bethesda.

Brian Chavez, who has been drafted three times, will be another big bat in the middle of the order, and will play at short and third. The team's top catcher will be Chance Harst, a prime defensive catcher from Southern Mississippi who was drafted in the 20th round out of high school.

The outfield has three guys Colangelo believes are very similar.

"I call them dirtballs," he said. "They're all gutsy and get after it."

One is Clay Whittemore, yet another Jacksonville State product who led the club with a .391 average, while also driving in a team-high 69 runs. He should hit in the three-hole, though is more of a slap-hitter. 6-3, 200-pound Andrew Foster is not, and brings a powerful bat from Bowling Green. Left-hander Eli Boike will see some time in the outfield and on the mound.

"My opinion is it's more about developing, getting them playing everywhere," Colangelo said. "The winning will come along, but it's just like learning, giving them the experience of a lifetime. This is my ninth year here, and I've yet to see a kid go away from Bethesda saying, 'Oh, this sucked.'"

Rockville

Shaffer was happy to see his team go as far as it did in its second year of existence, but as he put it, "not too excited."

"We evaluated some things that made us fall short and kind of hit on those things," he said. "This year's going to be more about offense. We've got a lot of guys that can hit, power hitters with a mixture of average guys that can run, and a lot of guys that we're looking for to hit doubles and jacks for us."

The power department should be taken care of with some physical specimens. The infield is led by a pair of big first basemen. Paul-Michael Klingsberg, a 6-4, 220-pound left-handed bat, and Mark Tracy (son of Pittsburgh Pirates manager Jim Tracy), who also catches, is 6-5, 225. The outfield features UC-Santa Barbara righty Mike Zuanich, who goes 6-4, 220.

Glen Kiture should start in left field for the Express, and though he has a little pop, should hit for average while driving in runs in the middle of the lineup. Eric Allen from Delaware State is very similar, but adds the strongest arm of the outfielders in right. Kevin Keith will play outfield and first base.

Bruce Alter will start at short through the first part of the season, while the right side of the infield should be rounded out by a pair of third basemen. Mike DeLeeuw from Garrett College will see some time, as will Sonoma State's Travis Babin, who will also see plenty of action from the Express bullpen.

There may be a platoon at second base, but Pete Fatse should see much of the time. A left-handed hitter, Fatse is a utility man who can play at second, short and even in the outfield. Damascus product Steve Domecus and Troy catcher Beau Brooks will handle the catching duties.

Only one pitcher returns from last year's Express squad: Jason Schnitzer, from UC-Santa Barbara. He was a starter last year and will again be in the rotation this year. Cal State-Northridge righty Max Gutierrez should also start. The rest of the staff will be hodgepodge, notably two more towering righties: 6-6, 230-pound Phillip Urso and 6-7, 235-pound Jimmy Duggan.

One of Shaffer's adjustments from last year's squad was to get some left-handed arms, and two will round out the Express staff. Brandt Hill also comes from UC-Santa Barbara, and will get a lot of work against powerful left-handed lineups, such as the Big Train's. Dennis Accomando from Connecticut is Rockville's other southpaw arm.

Though Rockville has a team built for power hitting this year, its home field could very well be a pitcher's park.

"We have a bigger mound that's a little higher than most people are accustomed," said Shaffer. "I try to build them that way specifically. Our strong suit the last couple years has been that we'll normally have lot of quality pitchers

come in, throw strikes, and get guys out. I'm pretty sure that offensively, we'll be solid. Hopefully, the pitchers will do their job, too."

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