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Ripken League: T-Bolts, Express in race for third

County rivals both want bye in upcoming playoffs

by Dan Greenberg | Staff Writer

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With a little over a week left in the Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League's third regular season, games are starting to take on a little more significance for both the Rockville Express and the Silver Spring-Takoma Thunderbolts.

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Sure, winning was important before. However, the main idea of the league is simply to make the hundreds of players in the league better for when they return to their respective colleges. So for most of the summer, managers Tom Shaffer of the Express (16-14) and John Duffy of the Thunderbolts (15-15) experimented with lineups, positions and pitching rotations, to give equal opportunity for their 25-plus man rosters to prove themselves.

But now, it's "winning time." With 10 games left, just one game separates the two teams in the race for the third playoff-seed, behind the Maryland Orioles and the Bethesda Big Train. That spot is important, because in a seven-team league, the top three finishers get playoff byes, while the bottom four must win two preliminary games to advance to the third round of the tournament.

"I hadn't really looked into playoff positioning just yet, but I know it's on the horizon," said Shaffer. "Obviously getting into that third playoff spot is important, and I've been looking at it."

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In fact, he's already thinking about the tiebreaker scenarios. With the Express' 9-0 victory over the Thunderbolts last Saturday at Blair Stadium, they now own a 3-2 lead in the season series. With two games left between the two, one Sunday and the other Tuesday, one more victory would give Rockville first- and second-round byes should they finish with identical records.

Though the spot is no doubt important, it doesn't mean everything, as Silver Spring-Takoma showed the Ripken League in the past. A year ago, they finished the regular season 14-26, but won a play-in game against the College Park Bombers and eventually knocked out the Express in the championship game.

But with the addition of the Herndon Braves (who are tied with the Thunderbolts in the standings) this season, the playoff format changed. Last year, a wild card needed to win only one preliminary round to reach the LCS.

Duffy, in his first year with the Thunderbolts, is well aware that the regular season is more important this time around. Even though his team has already bettered its 2006 win total, it faces an uphill climb if it wants to win its third-consecutive league tournament championship.

"Late [Monday] night before I went to bed, I checked to see how Rockville did — everybody does it," Duffy said. "I know we're 3-3 against Herndon and we play them Friday, so I told the team we've got to win that game. And we're one behind Rockville so we'd definitely like to win those two. With how close it is between the three of us, I wouldn't be surprised if it comes down to a tiebreaker, and you want to be on the right side of that."

The Express, on the other hand, are searching for their first title. They have been on the brink, finishing the regular season in second place and going deep into the playoffs in both previous years.

They have also followed a recipe for success that can best be described as "better late than never." Each summer, Shaffer sets a regular starting lineup by early July to close out the season, and each summer, the team has had a strong second half. Things appear to be going according to plan once again, as the Express won three straight games after Shaffer officially set his lineup on Saturday against the Thunderbolts.

While the strategy doesn't always sit well with his players, who aren't used to sitting out for games at a time, Shaffer is more concerned with wins and losses than feelings.

"The bottom line is that it's my job to win ballgames — I told them that from day one," he said. "One of our assistant coaches told me a story today, saying we've got a lot of Wally Pipp on our team [former Yankee first baseman whose injury allowed Lou Gehrig to play 2,130 games in a row]. We've got a couple guys in that situation now, where there's some situation where a guy has come in and earned a spot. I'm going to put the guys in that help us win."

Note: Rosters have been formulated for the league's annual All-Star game, which will be played Monday night at Ripken Stadium in Aberdeen.

Ripken League All-Star Game

For full rosters, visit ripkenscollegebaseball.org

When: July 23, 7:05 p.m.

Where: Ripken Stadium, Aberdeen

Who: The East All-Stars, comprised of 27 players from the College Park Bombers, Maryland Redbirds and Yose's Maryland Orioles vs. The West All-Stars, comprised of 27 players from the Bethesda Big Train, Herndon Braves, Rockville Express and Silver Spring-Takoma Thunderbolts

Players to watch: 3B Mike Celenza, Bombers (2005 Quince Orchard alum); OF Matt Boyd, Redbirds (2005 Magruder alum)

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