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Wednesday, Aug. 8, 2007

Baseball: Rockville's winning Expression

Birthday boy hits league title-winning home run

by Dan Greenberg | Staff Writer

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Rockville Express catcher Beau Brooks turned 20 years old on Friday. But he was the one who supplied the birthday present.

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With his team trailing by a run in the sixth inning of the Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League Championship Game, the rising junior at Troy (Ala.) University roped a fastball over the right-center field wall of Bethesda's Povich Field. The two-out, two-run home run gave the Express its first lead of the night, and the only one it would need to earn its first league title with a 4-3 win over the Bethesda Big Train.

That shot not only sent Brooks home to Alabama on a high note, but capped off his brilliant three-day league championship series. After struggling at the plate all summer, with just a .219 batting average, he went 6 for 13, scored three runs and drove in the two most important ones to earn the tournament's Most Valuable Player award.

"That's the ultimate right there, and on my birthday? You can't ask for anything more than that," said Brooks. "It's been long, it's been rough, it's been hard — but it's been so much fun, too. Any kind of championship is fun no matter what kind of league it is; of course, this is a really good league."

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After runs by Big Train right fielder Andrew Foster and centerfielder Pat Minogue, the Express trailed 3-1 before the decisive sixth inning. The rally began when third baseman Travis Babin singled with one out, and left fielder Mike Zuanich laced a long double with two outs to cut the lead to one.

Express pitcher Chris Notti, who entered the game in the fourth inning, pitched three perfect innings to close the deal, striking out designated hitter Chris Duffy to end the game and start the celebration on the mound.

It was the Express' second victory in consecutive days over the Big Train. Entering the tournament as the top two seeds, each needed to win four total games from Wednesday through Friday to earn the championship.

After losing their opener to the Maryland Redbirds, the Express ousted the Herndon Braves to set up a rematch, which they won, 7-5. Bethesda won its first two games, meaning Rockville had to beat the Big Train Thursday to earn a chance to meet again on Friday. The Express cruised to a 9-0 victory to set up the grand finale.

It was déjà vu for Express manager Tom Shaffer, only in reverse. A year ago, his team needed to win just one of two games to earn the 2006 Ripken League title, but dropped consecutive games to the Silver Spring-Takoma Thunderbolts.

"We were there last year and it doesn't feel too good," said Shaffer. "The difference between last year's team and this year's team is we hit a lot better. Sometimes these guys wait until late, which drives me absolutely nuts, but everyone came through in the end. You know, it's a great feeling."

All three Montgomery County teams have now won a title in the three-year history of the league. In 2005, the Thunderbolts and Big Train shared the inaugural title.

Though his team couldn't earn the coveted trophy for a second time, Big Train manager Sal Colangelo wasn't too upset. With a 24-18 season in the books, he has now been at the helm for three consecutive winning seasons, impressive considering the high player turnover teams have each season.

"We do things a certain way here, and nothing really changes from year to year," he said. "We'll be back to do it again."

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