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Rockville Express players congratulate Beau Brooks on his home run that helped them win the Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate League Championship Saturday night, left, while above Express coach Tom Shaffer accepts the winning trophy.

We Are The Champions!

Rockville Express tops Big Train to claim college crown

By Mike Brody
Special to the Sentinel

With the bases loaded, a simple deflection off Pete Fatse's glove in the top of the third inning appeared as if it might end the Rockville Express' chances of winning a championship in the Cal Ripken, Sr. Collegiate Baseball League playoffs last Thursday. Luckily, for Fatse and the Express, the ball trickled right into the glove of shortstop Bart Pettus who was covering second base.

But the Express wasn't just trailing at the time; it was on the verge of getting blown-out by the team that finished in last place in the League during the regular season. "We've been playing really well up the middle all year, so it was no surprise that he picked me up right there," Fatse said. Not only did Pettus' alert play pick up Fatse, it may have picked up the rest of the team as well.

The Redbirds got out in front

early at Shirley Povich Field, as Jason McManis' two-out three-run double put the team up 3-0 in the top of the first inning. Two innings later, it looked as if the Redbirds were on the verge of putting away the Express. Starting pitcher Joe Miller hit McManis to load the bases and then plunked Rob Pietroforte to force in a run and put the Redbirds up 4-0. Miller's third hit batter spelled the end of his night, and Kevin Fuqua came in from the bullpen to try and stop the bleeding.

Coming in with the bases loaded and only one out, Fuqua minimized the damage, allowing only one run in the top of the inning and shutting out the Redbirds until he was taken out of the game after the eighth inning.

The Express exploded in the bottom of the fourth inning. Pettus got the scoring started with an RBI single that plated Beau Brooks. Fatse followed Pettus with a three-run home run that brought the Express to within one run of the Redbirds.

"[Redbirds starting pitcher Ryan Kuhlman] was struggling a little bit, so I just was sitting fastball early in the count and he threw it in and I just took a pretty hard swing at it, so I tried to make things happen," Fatse said.

After a pitch hit Travis Babin, Steve Domecus tripled to tie the game and then scored on an error during the play. Kuhlman did not survive the entire inning and was replaced by Brett DiPasquale, who got the final out of the decisive frame.

The Express added an insurance run in the bottom of the eighth inning, and Dennis Accomando retired all three hitters he faced to close out the win and eliminate the Redbirds from the postseason.

The Express followed its win over the Redbirds with a 9-0 victory over the Bethesda Big Train Thursday night. Had the Big Train beaten the Express, it would have claimed the League title. Since the League's playoff format is double elimination,

the Express had to beat the Big Train twice in order to claim the championship. So the two teams faced off again on Friday.

The Big Train took an early 1-0 lead in the top of the first inning, but the Express tied the game up in the bottom of the second as Paul-Michael Klingsberg's single scored Eric Allen. The Big Train added run in both the fourth and the fifth inning, chasing Express starting pitcher Jonathan Harmston in the latter. Much like Fuqua the day before, reliever Chris Notti was virtually unhittable for the Express. Notti pitched four and one-third shutout innings and gave up only one hit during his time in the game.

The Express took the lead in the bottom of the sixth inning with a three-run rally. Zuanich's two-out RBI double scored Babin and brought the Express to within one run. The following batter, Brooks, parked a Ben Tootle pitch over the fence for a two-run home run. Brooks' home run put

the Express up 4-3 and capped all the scoring for the game.

Brooks happened to be the hero for the Express on his birthday. "It's fun," Brooks said. "I hear about people playing on their birthdays all the time, and I've never gotten to. So this is my first time ever playing on my birthday I think, and so that was fun."

Bethesda went down quietly after losing lead, failing to have a baserunner for the final three innings. "Got great pitching tonight, got great defense tonight, timely hitting," Shaffer said. The head coach also noted the drastic change in feelings between the time of winning the championship and the time of trailing the Redbirds the day before. "It was actually pissing me off to tell you the truth," said Shaffer, referring to when his team was trailing the Redbirds. "But the only thing that we do is keep coaching. We keep going. We keep a positive attitude, and it worked out in the end. We had a big, I think, fifth inning where we got six runs."