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Wednesday, July 9, 2008

Patience not a virtue to Ripken League teams

by Dan Greenberg | Staff Writer

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The old baseball adage goes like this: The season is a marathon, not a sprint. With 162 games in a Major League season, peaks and valleys of emotion do not change in a few days.

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But in the Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League, it just might be the opposite.

With 40 games packed into two months, players barely have time to get their feet wet before the stretch drive begins. A week ago, most squads were just cementing their starting lineups. But the league's All-Star Game is less than two weeks away, and the regular season ends five days later.

"We're at about exactly the halfway point right now, or a little past it," says Rockville Express manager James Pereira. "But it's already time to go for it."

Express

The league's fast pace hasn't affected any team quite like Rockville's boys of summer, who came out the gates slowly and have nary a game to lose in recovering.

After losing their first seven games, reaching the top of the standings is an afterthought for the Express, but they are starting to play their best ball of the season. With a doubleheader sweep of the Maryland Redbirds and four wins in six games last week, they are now 8-14. That's only three games out of third place in the eight-team league.

Even in the low times, Rockville's pitching was stellar. Led by Gaithersburg High graduate Austin Hurd (Towson University) and his .038 earned run average, the Express are second in the league in team ERA.

The hitting is finally starting to come around, as well, though they still are batting just over .220 as a team. Sunday against the Redbirds, Troy (Ala.) shortstop Adam Bryant drove in three runs and Rhode Island College infielder Josh Cardoso went 3 for 3 in the nightcap. Midseason pickup Kevin McAvoy started like gangbusters, hitting in nine of his first 12 plate appearances.

"I want to say our [playoff] chances don't depend on our hitting, because we played, what, 20 games without hitting the ball," said Pereira. "With the wooden bats, it's a whole different ballgame, I used to see it when I was coaching in the Cape Cod League all the time. Our kids are starting to realize you need to play small ball to be successful."

Big Train

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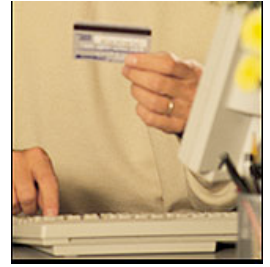
On the other hand, it took no time for the Big Train to hit the ball. Manager Sal Colangelo has been with the franchise for a decade, and can't remember ever seeing a team hit like this.

As of last Saturday, the Big Train are batting an astronomical .280 as a club. In a professional league, that would be good enough; in the Ripken League, where college players need time to adjust to wooden bats, it borders on absurd. Youse's Maryland Orioles are the second-best hitting club in the league at .246.

It's added up to one of the best teams in the Big Train's storied history. Winners of six straight after toppling the Silver Spring-Takoma Thunderbolts Sunday, the Big Train top the league standings at 19-5.

Thunderbolts

Highs and lows may define the other two Montgomery County representatives, but the Thunderbolts have remained at an even keel all season. They have never been more than a few games under or over .500, and as of last Saturday, had exactly 11 wins and 11 losses.



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