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Wednesday, July 16, 2008

Express rising, T-Bolts slumping in Ripken League

by John Y. Wehmuller | Staff Writer
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Friday and Saturday were simply the wrong time for the Silver Spring-Takoma Thunderbolts to see the Rockville Express on their schedule. For the Express, this point in the season is just the right time.

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Rockville topped the T-bolts, 12-0 Friday and 5-4 Saturday, running its Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League winning streak to five games. The Express ran into an even hotter team Sunday, dropping both ends of a doubleheader to the College Park Bombers, but through the weekend had still turned their 0-7 start into an 11-16 record.

“A lot of the guys here struggled in the beginning,” Express outfielder Todd Eskelin said. “Now a lot of us are coming together and playing as a team. Everyone’s falling in sync.”

The Thunderbolts, idle Sunday, entered the week on a five-game losing streak. They are tied with the Express for fourth place in the league, also with an 11-16 record.

They have also been without manager John Duffy, suspended by the league for four games after being ejected from a 6-3 loss to the Bombers July 8. Two of the team’s losses minus Duffy were by a single run, after it started the season winning six of eight one-run games.



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“The league has still not called to tell me why I was suspended,” Duffy said. “This league is supposed to be about the players, and a lot of the returning players came back to play for me. ... We hadn’t been playing good baseball, but when your head coach isn’t there, it’s tough to turn things around.”

Friday’s Express win was dominant. Gaithersburg High graduate Austin Hurd recovered from a rocky start to throw five shutout innings. Eskelin went 4 for 5 with 5 runs batted in, including a two-run home run to start the scoring in the top of the fourth inning.

Saturday’s was a bit different. Pinch hitter Joey Martin singled in two runs with two out in the bottom of the eighth inning to give Rockville a 5-2 lead. But the Thunderbolts rallied in the top of the ninth, behind an RBI double by Drew Weatherford, who later scored from third on a groundout to make it 5-4.

With a runner on third and one out, though, Express relievers Kevin Fuqua (Rockville native) and Jordan Mathers combined to shut the door.

“It’s the same with my years on the Cape [Cod League]; it takes a month to figure out how to hit with a wooden bat,” Express manager James Pereira said. “A month’s up, and here we are. ... We’re making plays defensively, our pitching’s been good and we’re getting some timely hitting.”

Going into Monday’s play, Rockville sat fourth in the eight-team league in both team ERA and team batting average. The latter is up to .238, led by Kevin McAvoy (.432 average, .514 slugging percentage in 12 games) and Eskelin (.293, .480 slugging in 23 games).

The Thunderbolts are seventh in the Ripken League in both categories, and at .215 are hitting just three points better than the last-place Alexandria Aces. Outfielders Mike Lang (.271, 11 runs scored) and Jeff Jones (.266, 16 runs, 12 stolen bases) have been bright spots at the top of the order.

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