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Wednesday, July 23, 2008

Express take hard-luck Ripken League defeat

by Dan Greenberg | Staff Writer
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The numbers were in favor of the Rockville Express Sunday.

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Hosting the last-place Maryland Redbirds in a late-season Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League affair, a Rockville hitter reached base in every inning, including leadoff hitters in each of the first six. The Express also got terrific pitching from Kevin Fuqua, a Rockville native, who struck out seven in six and two-thirds innings of work.

Yet it seemed like nothing could go right for the Express.

A day of missed opportunities, culminating in a 7-3 loss to the Redbirds (12-23), was a fitting clincher of the first losing season in Express (13-21) history.

There have been plenty of positives both offensively and defensively, especially in the last month. After starting the season 0-7, the Express have essentially played .500 ball and climbed from the league cellar to the middle of the standings.

But the pluses have been tempered by the minuses for the defending Ripken League champions. For the first time in their four-year existence, they are not amongst the league's elite squads; well behind Youse's Maryland Orioles, the Bethesda Big Train and the College Park Bombers, all of whom have over 20 games.

With just over a week remaining until the league tournament begins, their loss to the Redbirds means they can finish no higher than fourth place.

"We're just a struggling a little bit with the sticks right now, not getting that big hit," said Express manager James Pereira. "Hey, Fuqua pitched well, otherwise it could've gotten ugly. We pissed on some balls today. Sometimes you piss some balls and they catch them, and sometimes you stick the bat out, boom, and it blooms in."

Time after time, Redbirds starting pitcher Ben White got himself into trouble by allowing runners on base. Express leadoff hitter Justin DeMarco started four potential rallies in the first seven innings; his one-out bunt single in the seventh was the first time he didn't lead off an inning.

But Rockville left a staggering 11 men on base, usually with close-but-no-cigar line drives that simply found Redbird gloves.

It was the reverse on the mound. Anytime Express starter Chad Smith got into trouble, the Redbirds cashed in. Rockville's righty allowed runs in each of the first two innings, and after

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allowing consecutive hits in the third, he was lifted in favor of Fuqua.

The rising sophomore at La Salle (Pa.) knows all about frustration. He missed the early part of the summer to meniscus surgery on May 29 and the ensuing rehabilitation. It was the second time he's suffered the knee tear.

The graduate of the Avalon School did have some frustration Sunday, allowing three earned runs on a dribbling double down the left field line, a single past a drawn-in infield and a bloop double down the right field line. Otherwise he was spotless, striking out Redbird after Redbird from the minute he entered the game. In the fifth inning, Fuqua whiffed all three hitters he faced.

“I think it’s the best I pitched since coming back from knee surgery,” said Fuqua. “I was definitely throwing a lot harder than I normally do. My arm feels great. It hasn’t felt like this in awhile.”

Notes: Former Gaithersburg High pitchers Kevin Brady (Orioles) and Austin Hurd (Express), 2004 Sherwood grad Kyle Obal (Express) and 2006 Quince Orchard alum Mike Celenza (Bombers) all participated in Tuesday night’s Ripken League All-Star Game, held at the Big Train’s Shirley Povich Field. ... To date, Hurd ranks fifth in the league in earned run average (1.46), while Celenza leads the league in hitting at an even .400. He is on pace to shatter the previous record of .371, set in 2005 by the Express’ R.J. Brown.



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