

BLACKSBURG MAKES REGIONALS AN UPSETTING AFFAIR

Date: July 13, 2005

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BLACKSBURG -- The Blacksburg Dixie Youth Pre-Majors All-Star team is heading to the state tournament.

After dropping the first game of the district tournament held in Patrick County last week, Blacksburg's 9- and 10-year-olds reeled off five victories in as many days to secure the title. "The boys played very unselfishly and as a team," said third-year coach Mike Wolfert. "A lot of different people participated in whatever way they could."

The result for the victors is a trip to the state tournament Friday in South Boston where they will face the Vinton Nationals in the 2 p.m. opener.

Reaching the state tournament was a quite a feat.

In a tournament usually dominated by host Patrick County or perhaps by a team from Franklin County, it was teams from the New River Valley that shined in 2005. Blacksburg's only defeat in the tournament came in the opening game against Christiansburg.

"It makes it hard to win your way back through, and I was concerned," Wolfert said. "We didn't pitch real well that day, and we knew Christiansburg had a good game going into the thing."

After easily defeating Pulaski West (7-0) and Pulaski East (23-2), Blacksburg met powerhouse host Patrick County, which won the state tournament and went to the national tournament in 2004.

"To move on, we had to beat them at their place, twice," Wolfert said. "And they have very enthusiastic fans, and the trip was an hour and half. That's the hard part of it, driving back and forth."

Blacksburg pitching ace Todd Dunbar didn't seem affected by the home town crowd or the drive. Dunbar threw a no hitter, striking out 11 of the unbeaten Patrick County All-Stars in the 5-2 victory. He also drove in four of Blacksburg's five runs with his three hits.

Blacksburg had to play Patrick County again the following day.

"Alex Shimosono pitched the whole game, and he throws slow but accurate," Wolfert said. "They hit the ball, but our guys played defense."

After the 9-2 victory in the sequel versus Patrick County, Blacksburg met rival Christiansburg in the final.

"We felt confident because we were hitting the ball well by then," Wolfert said. "I knew if we could hit well, then we could win."

Wolfert started Dunbar to "set the tone for the first three innings and get some confidence."

Dunbar departed with the lead and lefty Aiden Ball closed out the 13-6 victory. Blacksburg hitters were led by Michael Wolfert Jr, who went 3-for-5, scored three runs and stole five bases. Both Ball and his twin brother, Colin, had two hits apiece and Shimosono went 2-for-4 with three RBI.

Blacksburg's squad was assembled from the members of four regular season teams. The team receives no financial support from the Blacksburg Department of Parks and Recreation.

"I think it is remarkable that Don Gresh started this league," Wolfert said of the president and founder of the Blacksburg Baseball Association. "It provides an opportunity for these kids to play baseball at a

competitive level they wouldn't normally have in the area."

The Blacksburg youth baseball league is still engaged in coach pitch at the 9- and 10-year-old age group.

That means that during game a coach rather than an opposing player pitches to his team during games. The rule is designed to speed up games by preventing young pitchers and their usual wildness from slowing the action.

It's great for speedy games, not so great for the development of young pitchers or preparation for the more advanced levels of the game.

"I started this when my son was playing and have continued it even though he has moved on," Gresh said. "I wanted to give kids in Blacksburg the same opportunity to play competitive baseball like they have in other areas."

What's next?

-The All-Stars play in Friday's state tournament.

-They face the Vinton Nationals at 2 p.m. in South Boston.