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Majors tame pesky T-Birds

Tue, August 5, 2008

INTERCOUNTY BASEBALL: An 8-1 win gives London the best-of-seven quarter-final with Hamilton in six games

By **RYAN PYETTE, FREE PRESS SPORTS REPORTER**

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HAMILTON -- This time, the London Majors didn't need a lightning storm to help subdue the Hamilton Thunderbirds.

A healthy Adam Echlin provided all the electricity required to turn out the lights in the Steel City.

The 33-year-old starting pitcher from Amherstburg, fully recovered from an ankle injury, no-hit Hamilton through six innings and led London to an 8-1 blowout victory before 350 last night at Bernie Arbour Stadium.

The first-place Majors finally eliminated pesky eighth-place Hamilton in six games -- the Intercounty Baseball League's longest opening-round series. Now, London meets the Oshawa Dodgers in the league semifinal set to begin at Labatt Park later this week.

The sixth-place Dodgers (17-19) pulled off the only upset of the opening round with a 4-1 series victory over Paul Spoljaric and the third-place Barrie Baycats, who finished 24-12 and in third spot.

The second-place Guelph Royals dispatched the Kitchener Panthers in five games (after dropping the opener) and will meet the Brantford Red Sox, who swept the defending champion Toronto Maple Leafs 4-0.

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"It was a bounce-back start (after getting beat up by Guelph in his final regular-season start) -- and I bounced back," said Echlin, who eventually surrendered a leadoff single in the seventh to Hamilton first baseman Henry Duke. "I probably should've rested during the regular season, but I just kept pitching. I needed that break and now I feel great."

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That's good news for London's playoff hopes. Echlin allowed just back-to-back singles in his seven innings of work. Hamilton scored its lone run off reliever Pierre Miville-Deschenes in the eighth inning.

"I give Echlin all the credit -- he had a bad ankle and he went out there and did a great job," London manager Roop Chanderdatt said. "All year, our pitching's been a strength and we weren't worried about it at all."

The Majors are moving on, but they're going to miss playing at Bernie Arbour, where they won all three games and scored 25 times. They managed just seven runs in 24 innings at home, where they had won 15 of 18 during their pennant-winning campaign.

"We have a young team and I think we pressed a little bit in front of the big crowds at home," Chanderdatt said, "but we'll hit there. Hamilton pitched well in this series, but these guys (the Majors) have more they want to do. There was no big celebration after the win."

Second baseman Jeff Helps of Wyoming, who sat out the first game with a lingering leg injury, was London's offensive boost all series. He hit .474 (nine-for-19), scored five runs and knocked in six.

Back in his familiar spot at the top of the lineup, the 23-year-old Helps created havoc by stealing four bases.

London scored more runs -- three -- in the first four innings last night than they did in all of a Game 3 loss to 19-year-old lefty Jesse Reinstein. Catcher Mason Reilly's two-run homer gave the Majors a 5-0 lead and chased the University of Buffalo hurler with one out in the fifth.

Hamilton never got the chance to come back with Game 1 starter Coogie Freedman, who was unavailable for the rest of the series after the 28-year-old threw a gem in London. He had work commitments in Florida.

"We just didn't hit," Hamilton manager Jason Booth said. "They threw a good pitcher out there and you can't win with one run. But no one expected anything of us. We lost nine starters this year and we put up a good fight. We had pitchers playing positions and did pretty

well.

"We have nothing to be ashamed of."

In a bizarre moment, plate umpire Ben Mercier warned the London bench in the fourth for pounding a bat rhythmically against the dugout wall. That prompted Chanderdat and base coaches James Sinfield and Casey Pulham to argue with three different umpires simultaneously. No one was tossed.

Two pitches later, Helps hit a chopper over the mound and was called safe on a bang-bang play after Hamilton shortstop Scott Wells bare-handed the ball and zipped it to first. The hit scored a third London run.

The call sent Booth, who had already protested Friday's game cut short by rain, flying from the Thunderbirds dugout for another face-to-face with the umpire.

London jumped to the early lead with two runs in the second inning. After a Kevin Virtue double pushed Reilly to third, designated hitter Toshi Sasa lofted a deep sacrifice fly ball to right. Rudy Vallejos, who had seen irregular duty this year before the playoffs, lashed a two-out, RBI double to right that outfielder Richard Rausch overran, allowing Vallejos to scamper to third.

The Majors loaded the bases, but shortstop David Narodowski flew out to right.

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