

SPORTS

OILERS FINISH PERFECT WEEKEND WITH PROVINCIAL TITLE



The Virden Oilers competed for a provincial championship on one of Canada's oldest diamonds, located in Dugald.

By Robin Wark

EMPIRE-ADVANCE

The Virden Oilers went undefeated to claim the Baseball Manitoba Senior A Provincial Championship.

"We played well defensively and threw strikes all weekend, which helped with limiting stress on our pitchers," Oilers player Keifer Johnston said. "OC (Owen Charles) was very good for us all weekend at third, which can be a tough spot for an 18-year-old. We strung hits together this weekend, and guys like Bo (Bootsman) and Dex (Dexter Whittle) came up big for us on Sunday."

The local squad defeated the host Springfield Braves 5-3 in the title tilt on July 19. It was the Oilers' fourth win of the weekend.

"We got off to a quick start as we did all weekend," Oilers veteran Tanner Lewis said of the championship game. "Timely hits and good at-bats in the first inning gave us a 3-0 lead. Chris Hendrickson, who we picked up from Wawanesa for the tournament, threw really well for us in the finals. He attacked their hitters and didn't walk many. When they put the ball in play, our defence was excellent and it was all weekend and made some timely plays to get us out of some jams."

"Everyone contributed in one way or another, whether a big hit, stealing a base and being aggressive on the base paths, making those defensive plays when we needed it, to the guys on the bench providing energy. It was a full team effort."

The July 17-19 tournament was played in the community of Dugald in the R.M. of Springfield. Visiting teams were impressed with the facilities.

"The diamond atmosphere was like Field of Dreams," the Oilers' Leif Wilson said.

Gerald Palidwor, the president and the general manager of Springfield Baseball, said, "Braves Field in Springfield is the second oldest continually operating baseball grounds in Canada behind Labatt Field in London, Ontario. We are the third oldest in the world in the world, we believe."

"It was pretty cool to play one of the oldest sports on a historical diamond," Wilson said.

The Oilers were part of history in the tournament's opening contest. After work was completed the night before, the game was the first ever at the diamond with dugouts.

Virden earned a 13-3 mercy-rule victory over the Carberry Royals in that July 17 contest. Reed McGrath pitched four innings for Virden, while Jeff Peel threw for one.

The next day, the Oilers completed a sweep of



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

The Virden Oilers captured the Baseball Manitoba Senior A Provincial Championship.

their pool play games with a 10-0 shut out win, by the mercy rule, against the North Winnipeg Pirates. Hendrickson pitched that game for Virden.

In a semifinal game on July 19, the Oilers defeated the Carman Cardinals 5-2. Bootsman hit a three-run home run in the bottom of the sixth to help power Virden to the finals.

"In the semi, Reed threw really well keeping Carman at bay and the defence behind him really played well," Bootsman said. "We were fortunate to have some timely hitting from some guys and that got us into the final."

Pitching was a strength for the Oilers at the provincial tournament. Lewis noted that Hendrickson "was great for us all weekend, as were our other pitchers Reed McGrath and Jeff Peel. We didn't have to use our pitching depth because these three guys threw so well that we didn't have to use anyone else."

In addition to Hendrickson, the Oilers had picked up the Brandon Young Guns' Bradley Schoonbaert for the tournament. Lewis said he "gave us some clutch hits, and fit in seamlessly with our group."

The youthful Oilers team was 3-12 during the South West Baseball League season. Tyson Draper and Toby Troughton tied with the Brandon Cardinals' JT Martine for the league lead in stolen

bases with 11. Braeden Lewis, who hit for a .375 average, paced the Oilers with 10 runs batted in during the regular season. Whittle batted .400.

McGrath led Virden with 33 innings pitched. Among team members who threw more than four innings, he had the top earned-run average at 3.18.

The Oilers won their final game of the season 11-4 over the Rivers Comets, who finished second in the SWBL North Division. Draper said a combination of factors played a part in that July 5 road win.

"Starting with Reed McGrath, throwing the entire game for us. He allowed six hits over the entire game and allowed only one earned run. Our defence made the plays they had to as well in the field. Most importantly however was our offence. We struggle as a team to score runs at times and we exploded with 11 runs in the game. We were creating hits and doing it at the right time."

That momentum seemed to carry over to the provincial tournament.

"We are very proud of what we were able to accomplish this weekend," Tanner Lewis said. "It was a tough start to our year as we struggled to find some wins in close games, but facing that adversity got us ready for this weekend, and it's a great way to end our season, you always want to end the year on a winning note, and we were able to do just that."