



PHOTOS COURTESY OF RICK BODDIE



Above, Springfield Post 176 team tri-captain Brennan Miller, when he is not on the mound, sees plenty of action at second base. Above right, Matt Keen, a Lee High School graduate, is 4-1 for Post 176 this season.

Legion Post 176 Begins To Hit its Stride

Springfield American Legion baseball team is young but strong on the mound.

BY RICH SANDERS
THE CONNECTION

Over the first half of the District 17 (Northern Virginia) American Legion baseball season, the Springfield Post 176 team's overall play has fluctuated. A fast start marked by lopsided victories was followed by a string of close losses. Most recently, going into this week, the locals had won three out of their last four games.

The rollercoaster ride the team has experienced thus far is partly due to Springfield's overall legion baseball inexperience. Twelve of the team's 17 players are in their first summer with Post 176.

But overall, Springfield Post 176, made up of current or former players from Lee, South County and West Springfield high schools, is in a fairly good position. With the Fourth of July All-Star Game break, marking the season's mid-point, less than a week away, Springfield held a solid 9-7 record and stood in third place in the District 17 standings. Vienna Post 180 (14-2) and Arlington Post 139 (11-5) were first and second, respectively.

"We started out of the gate like a firecracker," said Springfield Post 176 Manager Al Vaxmonsky, whose team won its first four games, all by the 10-run slaughter rule, to begin the season. "Then we lost five games in a row, four of them by one run. We're a

young team. We only have five returning players."

Chances are good that Springfield's season, because of the team's strong starting pitching, will begin to stabilize into a pattern of winning with some regularity, and that there will be no more extended losing streaks.

"Our pitching is our strength right now," said Vaxmonsky.

SPRINGFIELD HAS a terrific one-two starting pitching punch in right-handers Brennan Miller and Matthew Keen, both sporting 4-1 records. Miller, a South County graduate, was 5-2 on the mound for Chesapeake College (Wye Mills, Md.) this past spring. He has a good curve ball to go with a medium fastball. On Thursday, June 24, he tossed a complete game (nine innings) shutout in Post 176's 10-0 win over Alexandria Post 24.

"He has nasty off speed stuff," said Vaxmonsky, of Miller's breaking pitch. "He doesn't overpower anyone but he has a [good enough] fastball to set up [other pitches]."

Meanwhile, Keen, who graduated from Lee High School earlier this month, pitched well for the Lancers during the spring but did not have a good record to show for it as a result, in part, of a lack of run support.

"He was always in games, but Lee wasn't hitting for him," said Vaxmonsky, who has

been pleasantly surprised with Keen's step-up summer season.

Post 176 has also received a quality season from right-hander Shannon Smith, a West Springfield High graduate who attends James Madison University. Smith was called upon for long inning relief duty this past Sunday in Springfield's 13-10 come-from-behind win over Annandale Post 1976, a team made up of players from Annandale, Lake Braddock and Jefferson high schools.

Smith entered the game, which took place at Lake Braddock Secondary School, in the top of the second inning with Springfield trailing 7-0. He ended up pitching 7-2/3 effective innings to earn the win. Post 176 had gotten back into the ball game by scoring six runs in the bottom of the second inning and went on to ultimately win the scorefest.

"He threw strikes and had a good off speed pitch," said Vaxmonsky, of Smith's outstanding outing out of the bullpen.

ON OFFENSE, Vaxmonsky said his team has shown good improvement. The mentality of some of his first-year players early on was to simply hit the ball far and hard. But the longtime Post 176 skipper, who has always fashioned his managerial style to the National League where bunting, hitting

behind runners and being patient at the plate is a staple of many big league clubs. Vaxmonsky has seen a positive transformation from his players, who are doing more things at the plate to help the team as opposed to just swinging away.

"Our batting has not been as good as I expected, but we're starting to turn it around," he said.

The team's batting standouts have included Joey Townsend and Nathan Slater, who hit in the No. 3 and 4 spots in the lineup, respectively.

Townsend, a South County graduate, is set to play baseball at JMU this coming school year. He is hitting .512 for Post 176 with a homer, seven doubles and a team-leading 17

RBIs. Slater, a catcher who graduated from Lee and will be playing ball at Old Dominion University, is batting .452 with six home runs, seven doubles and 16 RBIs from the clean-up position. He belted five home runs during his senior season at Lee this past spring.

"He has a great swing and the ball just jumps off his bat," said Vaxmonsky, of Slater.

Also having a good season at the plate is South County graduate Nick Digby, the team's No. 5 hitter who played collegiate

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SEE LEGION, PAGE 19

Legion Post 176 Baseball

FROM PAGE 15

baseball at UNC Wesleyan this past school year. Digby (nine RBIs), who plays right field, has knocked two home runs, three triples, and four doubles.

Other good contributors with the bat have been first baseman Clinton Jones (.436 batting average), a Lee graduate and student at the University of West Virginia, and backup catcher Sean Kolbenstetter, a rising junior at Lee who is hitting at a .308 clip for Springfield.

On Saturday, June 26, Post 176 split a double-header against Falls Church Post 130 at Lee High School. Springfield won the opener, 9-1, before losing 3-0 in the second

game. Lee graduate Sean Ruggles, who attends Louisiana State University, was the hard-luck loser in the second game. Over seven innings, Ruggles gave up one earned run and only five base hits.

“He really pitched well for us,” said Vaxmonsky. “We had a shot at winning. But their guy pitched well too.”

Seven Post 176 players will participate in the Independence Day District 17 All-Star Game next Sunday at Waters Field in Vienna. Those players are: Joey Townsend, Brennan Miller, Nathan Slater, Nick Digby, outfielder/pitcher John Ponton (Longwood University), recent Lee graduate and short-stop Jake Boswell and Shannon Smith. The All-Star game will begin at 11 a.m.