



PHOTO BY RICK BODDIE

Springfield Post 176 put a late season 13-game win streak together that extended into last week's District 17 tournament.

District Champs Again

Springfield Post 176 defeats top seed Vienna in finals.

BY RICH SANDERS
THE CONNECTION

Championship baseball teams know how to play from behind. That is certainly the case with the Springfield Post 176 American Legion squad, which rallied from an early four-run deficit and defeated Vienna Post 180 by a score of 13-6, in the playback championship game of the District 17 (Northern Virginia) tournament Friday night, July 23 at Waters Field in Vienna.

The win gave Springfield the District 17 title for the eighth time in the 21 years it has been under Manager Al Vaxmonsky. On seven other occasions, Vaxmonsky's Post 176 team made it to the tournament finals before losing.

Playing in the District 17 championship game seems to be a fairly regular scenario for Springfield. That, in fact, has been the case in 15 of the past 21 years.

"It was a huge win for us," said Springfield Post 176 pitcher Brennan Miller, who was a huge factor in his team's tournament success. "We've really come together as a team."

With the District 17 crown under its belt, Springfield opened up play at the eight-team, double-elimination American Legion Virginia State tournament this past Monday, July 26 with a game at tourney host Danville Post 325. (See story page 15).

AT LAST WEEK'S DISTRICT 17 tournament, Springfield (20-8 season record), the eight-team tournament's No. 2 seed, received a first round tournament bye before winning games over Falls Church Post 130 on Monday and top-seed Vienna on Tuesday to reach the finals.

There, in the championship round, Post 176 again met Vienna, which had reached the finals with a

loser's bracket playoff win on Wednesday. Going into the finals, Springfield had the upper hand, having yet to lose in the tournament while Vienna had one loss. That meant that, in the championship round, Post 180 would have to beat Springfield twice in order to win the title of the double elimination tournament. Springfield only needed one win, either on Thursday or on Friday.

As it turned out, Vienna defeated Springfield, 9-8, in Thursday's game at Waters Field to force a final game showdown on Friday.

Springfield had nearly overcome an 8-2 deficit in Thursday's loss. It had rallied to tie the game at 8-8 before Vienna scored a run in the bottom of the eighth inning to regain the lead at 9-8. Springfield was not able to score in the ninth and Vienna, with the victory, forced the finals playback the following evening.

One of the highlights of the Thursday night loss for Springfield was a home run over the left center field fence off the bat of Miller. Springfield, however, came up just short in the game. The loss snapped a 13-game Springfield win streak.

In Friday's playback game for the league title, Springfield did not panic after Vienna tallied five runs in the bottom of the first inning to take a 5-1 lead.

Springfield starting pitcher Matt Keen had struggled in that first inning but came back strong over the next five innings, allowing no runs and no hits from the second through sixth innings.

Meanwhile, the Springfield offense got Post 176 back into the game. Perhaps the biggest hit came in the middle innings when Miller, who went 3-for-4 from the No. 2 position of the Springfield line-up, belted a ball to the base of the left center field fence for a two-run double that gave Springfield the lead at 7-6. The next batter, Joe Townsend, followed that up with a first-pitch, towering two-run homer over the left center field fence to make the score 9-6 Springfield. Townsend finished the night 4-for-6 with three RBIs.

Springfield broke the game open in the seventh inning. Jake Boswell and Miller both reached on bunt singles to start off the top of the seventh. Later in

Return to Championship Form

FROM PAGE 11

the inning, Nick Digby sent a hard groundball triple down the third base line that scored three runs.

Springfield had taken control.

“Once we got the lead we were not going to give it up,” said Miller.

Keen, who threw 128 pitches over 6-1/3 innings, earned the win. Miller was outstanding in relief, allowing no runs and one hit over 2-1/3 innings to keep Vienna’s bats silent late in the game.

“I knew I had Brennan in my hip pocket [for relief],” said Vaxmonsky. “I knew Matt was spent [by the seventh inning].”

Miller said he had told Vaxmonsky he could pitch in relief if needed, despite having thrown 140 pitches three days earlier in his team’s second round 5-3 win over Vienna.

“It was our last game [of the District 17 season], and I told my coach I was ready to go,” said Miller. “I kind of knew how to throw to [Vienna]. I pitched against them two times last year [as well as earlier in the week]. After a start I can usually throw again after a day or two.”

VAXMONSKY said both of the championship round games against Vienna were similar in that Springfield fell way behind early in both. Post 176 could not get the victory on Thursday but it did on Friday with everything on the line.

“It was an exact replica of the previous night,” said the Springfield skipper. “We had been down on Thursday and fought back to tie it up at 8-8 and then lost.”

When Springfield, in Friday’s playback for the league title, fell behind early again, he recalled say-

ing, “Oh boy, here we go again.”

But assistant coach Len Yankosky had encouraging words.

“He said, ‘Hey, there’s plenty of baseball to play. Let’s see how things unfold.’ Then over the next couple of innings we got some hits. Our guys realized from the night before how we could come back and could have won that game. We knew we could come back again [on Friday].”

Springfield, in fact, exploded for 13 runs to wipe out Vienna’s early 5-1 lead in the title game.

“We knew we were going to come back,” said Townsend, Springfield’s No. 3 hitter. “We score a lot of runs.”

Both Keen and Miller had played significant pitching roles earlier in the week in Springfield’s first two tournament games. Keen, in a first round 21-9 win over Falls Church at Hayfield Secondary School, went the distance in a slaughter-rule shortened contest. He threw 120 pitches that night.

On the following night, Miller took the hill against Vienna at Waters Field. In a 5-3 Springfield win that sent Vienna into the loser’s bracket and advanced Springfield to the finals, Miller went the complete nine innings, throwing 140 pitches and striking out 14 to just one walk.

“He was huge the entire tournament,” said Vaxmonsky, who said Miller utilized his outstanding curve and slider pitches in Friday’s finals against Vienna.

Townsend said Springfield’s pitching and timely hitting were huge factors in capturing the District 17 crown.

“Pitching was probably our biggest key and we were getting big hits,” he said.

Post 176 Falls in State Opener

The Springfield Post 176 American Legion baseball team, in a game that began on Tuesday night at 10:50 p.m. due to a long rain delay, lost its first round Virginia State playoff game to Danville Post 325 by a 6-4 score. The first round postseason affair lasted close to three hours and did not end until 1:45 a.m.

The Springfield versus Danville game was the final of four state playoff games played at the same site on Tuesday. According to Springfield Manager Al Vaxmonsky, American Legion tournament officials were determined to get all four games completed. Rain interrupted the third game of the day. As a result, the fourth game between Springfield and Danville did not get started until the late hour.

Springfield, despite the loss, is still alive in the eight-team, double-elimination tournament and was scheduled to play its second game on Wednesday, technically later the same day in which Post 176’s first game ended, at 1 p.m. versus Chesapeake Post 280. Springfield had to win that game in order to remain alive in the tournament.

In the loss to Danville, Springfield was limited to six hits for the game. Post 176 trailed 6-0 at one point before rallying to get within 6-4 in the seventh inning. The team threatened to score more runs in both the eighth and ninth innings, but could not get any closer.

Joe Townsend had a double and a triple, while knocking in a run for Springfield. The other base hits for Post 176 came from Peter Hornig, Brennan Miller, Clinton Jones and John Ponton.

Matt Keen, Springfield’s starting pitcher, took the loss. He pitched four innings, allowing five runs (four earned) and nine hits. Reliever Sean Ruggles, in four innings of work, allowed no runs and just one hit.

On Monday night, Springfield attended the annual pre-American Legion tournament banquet. The event, catered by Outback Steakhouse, was attended by coaches and players from all eight teams and was held at the Danville Post 325 headquarters. The special guest speaker was Ferrum College head baseball coach Darren Hodges.

— RICH SANDERS