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Sports Week

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Back Mountain teams wear 4 district crowns

By DAVE KONOPKI
Sports Writer

For the past five years, Larry Lettie has been the president of the largest Little League program in Pennsylvania's largest district.

But in less than two months, Lettie will pound the gavel as the president of Back Mountain Baseball, Inc. for the final time. Earlier this year, Lettie decided this would be his final season in the top (or should we say "hot") seat.

What a going-away party they're throwing for him!

There are no balloons. No streamers. No people dressed in a purple dinosaur costume. Just flags. Lots and lots of flags.

The Back Mountain baseball and softball programs made District 16 history last week, capturing three titles and raising their total number of district championships this season to four. There are only five District 16 championships, in all levels of baseball and softball, available each season and never before has one league dominated the post-season the way Back Mountain teams have this year.

The Little League softball team captured the district title last week while the Junior and Senior League baseball teams followed suit. Ten days ago, the Senior League softball team won the league's first district championship of the year.

"I think it's a great way to go out," said Lettie, who served on the organization's board of directors for seven years, including five as president. "I just feel my time has come to step aside and let some of the young blood get involved. It's gratifying to see the program doing this well. I think Back Mountain has always had a strong program, even long before I became president. I just hope whoever takes over as president will keep the ball rolling. I hope the league keeps getting bigger and better."

Although he doesn't have any specific instructions for the new president, who will be elected at the league's general meeting on September 12, Lettie does have a few pointers.

"You can't forget that we're here for the kids," said Lettie, who will remain active in the league, including helping with the maintenance of the grounds and some umpiring next season. "I've al-

ways said that sometimes the adults should line up on the baselines during the middle of the season and have the kids come by to give us a kick in the pants just to remind us that we're here for the kids.

"Besides the kids, I think the biggest thing the next president has to do is give the people on the board of directors, and other league volunteers, a lot of responsibility," explained Lettie. "You have to give them the opportunity to run their portion of the league. They're in charge. The president should only oversee what they are doing. There are a lot of good young people in this league who can do a good job if you let them. But like I've always said, there are 'doers' and there are 'talkers'. This league needs the doers."

The Little League softball team, under manager Gary Naugle, defeated Mountaintop, 10-5, last week in the title game. The Junior League boys, under manager Russ Hoover, defeated a gutsy Bob Horlacher team, 8-5, in the title contest while the Senior League boys, under manager Steve Withers, captured the crown with a 15-7 win over Bob Horlacher.

On Monday, the Junior League boys and Senior League girls were the only Back Mountain teams remaining in inter-district play. Hoover's team came from seven runs down to beat Taylor, 12-8. The Junior League squad, which is just two wins away from a berth in the state tournament, will play Tioga on Wednesday at 5:45 p.m. in the Towanda area.

The seasons for the Senior League boys and the Little League girls came to an end last Monday, with the boys dropping a heart-breaking 9-8 decision to Abington in extra innings, while the girls ran into a buzzsaw in Roosevelt Trail, losing 4-0.

The Senior League softball team, under manager Larry Kriner, hosts the District 17 championship on Wednesday at the W.W. Kubis Memorial Field at 5:30 p.m.

Senior League baseball

If you don't think good things can happen to those who work hard at achieving a goal, just ask Steve Withers. He's seen it first hand.

The Back Mountain Senior League baseball program captured their first-ever District 16 cham-



LET'S TALK - Back Mountain Little League softball manager Gary Naugle took Courtney Bouthot aside for a strategy session on how to hit Roosevelt Trail pitcher Tanya Santee, as coach Chris Cave

looked on. There wasn't much that could be done as the fireballer held Back Mountain to a single by Jen Noon. The District 16 champions were eliminated by the 4-0 loss.

POST PHOTO/RON BARTIZEK

pinship with a 15-7 win over Bob Horlacher last Saturday afternoon. But much more than the final score had Withers smiling.

"I'm estatic for these kids," said Withers, the team's manager. "They've worked hard and they've worked for this championship. Most people don't know the kind of sacrifices these kids have made. They have very little free time as it is and whatever they had, they've given it up. I'm so happy for these guys."

Many of the players on the team are involved in activities outside the baseball field, including a number of players who are members of the Dallas High School football team.

In addition to dedication, the team also has loads of talent.

"Talent-wise, this team is a coach's dream," said Withers, whose roster was filled with varsity high school players as well as starters on area freshmen teams. "We have defense, power at the plate and good pitching. They've done everything we've asked them to do."

The team has a deep pitching rotation which was proven in the district playoffs. Four different pitchers, Tom Klimek, Frank Valvano, Justin Jumper and Bill Puchalsky, each picked up a mound win during the tourney. The offense was led by Jumper, Valvano, Fran Brown and John

Martin.

Some individual players overcame adversity to help the team win the title. Klimek, an outstanding player, was seriously ill for more than six months and did not play freshman baseball. Aaron Getz overcame a bout with the chicken pox to play a solid tournament.

But it wasn't just the players who Withers included in his "team effort" motto.

"I'm very, very appreciative of what the parents of these players have done," said Withers, who saw a large group of parents and volunteers arrive at the Dallas Sr. High School field at 7 a.m. last Saturday in an effort to get the field ready following heavy rainstorms the day before. "The parents sacrificed just like the kids did. It really was a team effort, from top to bottom."

Members of the team included Brian Pietraccini, Tom Klimek, Justin Jumper, Frank Valvano, John Martin, Fran Brown, Aaron Getz, Bill Puchalsky, Joel Withers, Jerry Delescavage, Jeremy Carsman, Brad Kohli, Kevin West and Ed Piekara.

Junior League baseball

Talk about expectations! The Back Mountain Junior League baseball team entered the District 16 playoffs with expectations running higher than the national debt.

After all, this was a team comprised of players from the 1993 District 16 Little League champions, Back Mountain American, and another team which had a strong showing in the district tournament and the Wilkes-Barre Rec Board tourney, Back Mountain National.

Add to that the fact that a handful of the 13-year-old players were either starters or major contributors to the Dallas freshmen baseball team as seventh-graders, and you can see why a feeling of excitement surrounded this team.

The didn't disappoint, either. The Back Mountain squad, under manager Russ Hoover, rolled through the tourney, beating their three opponents by an average score of 14-3, including an 8-5 win over Bob Horlacher in the title game.

"I'm just thrilled," said Hoover, who is assisted by Carl Dymond, Jay Pope and Herb Fehlinger. "We sailed through the first two games and then faced a Bob Horlacher team that wouldn't quit. We were leading 7-0 in the first inning but they came right back. I think we all learned something from that game, though. We know we can play a team who may not have as much talent as we do, but if we don't play hard, they could give us lots of trouble."

All that talent could lead to a clash of egos on some teams, but Hoover says the players have been great.

"We're playing as a team," said Hoover. "I told the team they would

have to have good attitudes and play as a team. We have some kids who don't start for us who would start on any other team we've played. I think defensively we've been outstanding and we have some players who can really hit a baseball hard. And I mean hard!"

According to Hoover, Kevin Pizzano and Kyle Droppers have done the bulk of the pitching for the team while the offense has been led by J.J. Smith, Jayson Pope and Rich Semanas.

Members of the team include Matt Barnard, Rich Semanas, J.J. Smith, Jayson Pope, Chuck Fehlinger, Kevin Pizzano, Kyle Droppers, Josh Dukas, Neil Dymond, Jonathan Saba, Matt Marchakitus, Justin Hoover, E.J. Ishley and Sean Hoskins.

Little League softball

Look up the definition of "character" in the dictionary, and you'll probably find a picture of the Back Mountain Little League softball team.

What other word could describe a team which could have folded when faced with adversity, but instead, rose to the occasion to defeat the pre-season tournament favorite on their own field and win the District 16 softball championship?

The girls made it through the winner's bracket unscathed, beating all of their opponents, including defending champion Mountaintop and powerful Nanticoke (twice). Many softball observers felt Mountaintop was the team to beat entering the double-elimination tourney.

Mountaintop played like the team to beat in their second game

against Back Mountain, beating them, 8-4, at the W.W. Kubis Memorial Field. Now, if they wanted the championship flag, the loca girls would have to beat Mountaintop on their own field.

It looked as though they were going to make it easily, jumping out to an 8-0 lead. But then the rain came. And so did the Mountaintop bats. The lead was cut to 8-5 and the host team had the bases loaded with two outs in the fourth inning when the game was halted.

The Back Mountain team had time to regroup but it appeared as though momentum was on the side of Mountaintop.

A lot of teams would have cracked under the pressure. A lot of teams would have given up. A lot of teams would have dreaded the 40-minute drive the following day back up the mountain.

But not this team. After winning pitcher Maria Wright registered a strikeout to bring Mountaintop's fourth-inning rally to a close when the game resumed, the Back Mountain squad scored two more runs, played good defense and captured the championship, 10-5.

Despite numerous requests for interviews, Back Mountain manager Gary Naugle did not return any messages.

Members of the team included Maria Wright, Scooter Perlis, Jen Noon, April Naugle, Abby Amann, Courtney Bouthot, Melissa DeCesaris, Kourtney Koslowsky, Annette Marino, Katie Natitus, Amanda Stolarick, Sarah Stolarick, Nicole Yuknavage and Jennifer Yurko.



ONE, BUT NOT TWO - Back Mountain second baseman Melissa DeCesaris fired to first after getting the force at second in a game Monday night. Back Mountain was eliminated by Roosevelt Trail after winning the district title.

POST PHOTO/RON BARTIZEK

Back Mountain in 9-10 finals

Back Mountain defeated Plains 10-7 Sunday, to move into the finals of the Swoyersville 9-10 tournament.

Back Mountain used five pitchers in the game, with Jim Belles picking up three strikeouts, Bob Gebhardt and Luke Miller two each, and Dave Walters and Colin Donnelly one apiece.

Six Back Mountain players had two hits each, with Chip Harrison, Josh Bryant, Luke Miller Eric Kowalek and Dave Walters going 2-for-4, and Billy Evans 2-for-3. Colin Donnelly went 1-for-2 with a double.

The win advances Back Mountain to the finals at the end of this week.

The local team blew out Kingston 20-2 July 19 to advance to

the game Sunday. In that game, Luke Miller, Bob Gebhardt and Tim Faneck combined for six strikeouts. Erick Kowalek and Dave Walters led at the plate, each going 3-for-4.

Lower Valley Tournament

Back Mountain National beat St. Theresa 10-8 July 20 in the Nanticoke, Lower Valley 9-10 tournament.

Colin Donnelly and Dave Walters each struck out three, while Jim Belles and Matt Metz fanned two apiece. Walters was 2-for-5 at the plate, with Belles, Ricky Branco and Jordy Spencer chipping in with doubles. Back Mountain met Northwest for the championship, in a game that took place too late for publication.

Halbing racing at Pocono this weekend

John Halbing of Dallas, leading in the GT 1 category in an 8-race series, will take to the track this weekend at Pocono National Raceway.

The race will be the seventh of the series, and the last held in the U.S. The final race takes place September 4 in Mosport, Canada. Qualifying runs will be held Saturday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. National races start at 9:30 a.m. Sunday.