

Hometown hero Fionn Keon walks off the Ontario Nationals in Titans' home opener victory at SAC



Aurora resident Fionn Keon drove in the game-winning run as the 17U Titans Baseball Club walked off the Ontario Nationals 3-2 at Saint Andrew's College on Saturday afternoon.

It was a stunning end to the first game of the 2023 season for the Titans who compete in the CPBL, the top youth baseball league in the province.

The Titans' winning rally was, indeed, a dramatic one. They entered the bottom of the seventh inning down 2-1 to the Nationals, but Aurora resident and Titans DH Nate Windle was hit by a pitch to get the tying run on base.

Titans' shortstop Jordan Sfyndillis cued the comeback by driving a ringing double off the right-centre field wall to score Windle and tie the game 2-2. Sfyndillis's clutch two-bagger was his second hit of the afternoon and his gutsy advance to third base set the stage for Keon's game-ending heroics.

Keon, the Titans' centerfielder and a Grade 12 student at SAC, used his home field knowledge to his advantage and chopped a hard shot at the Nationals' shortstop whose throw home was too late to nab the streaking Sfyndillis.

The winning run created a convulsive celebration by the Orange, White, and Blue-clad Titans on the SAC infield. The game-winning RBI by Keon made a winner of reliever Graham Marshall who went two innings in relief, striking out 5 and issuing only 1 walk.

Acting Titans' 17U Head Coach Denis Bailey couldn't have been happier with the result.

?It was exhilarating. I felt great for the team, especially since they struggled a bit in 2022. There isn't a better feeling in sports than a walk-off win in baseball.?

The veteran skipper, who was an NCAA Division 1 catcher in his playing days, offered insights into his pitchers' performances.

?Kai Hernandez recovered from a rough start to keep us in the game today and Graham Marshall had a great game in his debut for the Titans?throwing two solid innings.?

The 6'5" Hernandez bounced back from some early control problems and provided the Titans with a quality start. He struck out ten Nationals, walked two in the early innings, and surrendered just one earned run over five innings of work in the seven-inning CPBL game.

The Nationals, an original CPBL franchise that plays out of St. Mary's and uses the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame's main diamond as their home field, scored first in the third inning to take a 2-0 lead. The Titans pulled to within one in the fifth inning when Aurora resident Owen Norris crossed the plate to narrow the Nationals' lead to 2-1.

Coach Bailey praised the play of Norris, second baseman Tyler Pridham, and the end-of-game heroics of Windle, Sfyndillis, and Keon, but also noted that "It was a collective win. It was the ultimate team win."

Bailey was guest-coaching for Titans' 17U Head Coach Eddie McKiernan whose wife, Natalee, gave birth to their first daughter, Cali, on Friday.

McKiernan, a former California High School Athlete of the Year and Major League pitching prospect with the Los Angeles Angels, credited his team's aggression and Coach Bailey's gutsy calls at third for the victory.

"We were very aggressive on the base paths and forced the other team to play catch. It was the first day outside for everyone. Coach Bailey knew the percentages were in our favor this early in the year."

McKiernan, who also serves as the Titans' Director of Player Development and the organization's Pitching Coordinator, was pleased with his hurlers' efforts versus the Nationals.

"Kai pitched amazing and Graham Marshall filled up the strike zone. They had 15 strikeouts in seven innings."

With his daughter's birth in mind and his team's "walk-off" in the win column, Coach McKiernan used his penchant for understatement to note that, "It was a good way to start the season."

The Titans, a third-year "expansion franchise" in the Canadian Premier Baseball League, have a team in each of the league's 14U, 15U, 16U, 17U, and 18U divisions and joined the best youth baseball loop in Ontario in 2021 after establishing the organization in the Fergie Jenkins Showcase League.

The CPBL is the baseball equivalent to the OHL with 11 elite franchises spread across the province from Windsor to London to the GTHA to Ottawa. More than 85 per cent of the League's players commit to US College scholarships and many CPBL players are drafted by MLB teams every summer.

The Titans have signed 15 players from their Class of 2023 to US College scholarships and play their weekend doubleheader home games at SAC in Aurora and Whipper Watson Park in Newmarket.

Their year-round baseball facility is The True North Fieldhouse on 220 Pony Drive in Newmarket.

The 18U Titans' home opener versus the Toronto Mets was rained out on Sunday afternoon at SAC.

The inclement weather also washed out and postponed Aurora Mayor Tom Mrakas' Opening Day pitch to kick off the 18U Titans' 2023 season.

The Opening Day Ceremony will be made up in June and Mayor Mrakas' darting, two-seam fastball will be on display at SAC to kick off a midseason doubleheader.

By Jim Stewart