

14U Titans capture Louisville Slugger Wood Bat World Series Championship in Pittsburgh



Winning elite youth baseball tournaments in the USA is no easy feat.

So many circumstances work against Canadian ball clubs. Elevated American competition, ?hometown? umpiring, lack of familiarity with ballparks, fatigue from travel, living out of a suitcase for a week, the grind of surviving seven games in four days, and lack of home cooking are factors that take their toll on visiting teams.

However, the 14U Titans overcame these challenges in Pennsylvania this weekend. Most importantly, the Canadian Premier Baseball League team had some hardware to declare when the team's caravan of cars crossed the border on Sunday night.

The Titans?whose home diamond is at St. Andrew's College in Aurora ? did all the right things to battle through a grueling seven-game schedule. With a hard-fought 5-3 win over #1-seed NLB Mid-Atlantic in the final, the 14U Titans captured the Louisville Slugger Wood Bat World Series Championship in Pittsburgh.

Head Coach John Bethune couldn't have been happier.

?I'm incredibly proud of this resilient group. The boys worked hard and overcame adversity all weekend.?

The tournament did not start well for the CPBL squad.

Coach Bethune's charges lost their first two round robin games, but they bounced back to win their next two contests: 6-4 over the Ingomar Heat and 16-2 over the Grand Island Vikings. The two timely victories evened their record and stamped their ticket to the playoff round.

In the opening round of the playoffs, the #6-seeded Titans used a six-run outburst in the sixth inning to stomp the #3-seeded Brantford Red Sox 8-2 in a matchup of Canadian teams in Pennsylvania.

The 14U Titans received a quality start from Mato Rukovanjski who threw 6 innings, scattered 5 hits, yielded 0 ER, and struck out 4 Red Sox to earn the win.

Bethune praised his starter's performance versus Brantford.

"Mato had them off balance all game and stayed in the strike zone. He's been solid on the mound for us all year and he delivered another big performance in our first playoff game. The game was tight and tied at 2 through the first 5 frames; he gave us that chance to answer in a big way when we scored 6 in the 6th.?"

The veteran Titans coach singled out four offensive stars in the big win over Brantford.

"Dominic Williams, Michael Ventresca, Aiden Stewart, and Mato Rukovanjski led the way. The four hitters went a combined 8 for 12, scored 3 runs, and collected 6 RBI on the day. The big four continued to pound the baseball. Every time they came up, they delivered, and did most of their damage in the big 6-run, 6th inning."

The upset victory allowed the Titans to advance to the semifinals where they eliminated the #2 seed Ironmen Prime with a tidy 5-3 win. Aiden Stewart was the winning pitcher, scattering three hits and allowing two earned runs over 5.1 innings of work. Ronan Thompson recorded the save as efficiently as a closer can be. Remarkably, Thompson threw 2 pitches to record the final two outs by inducing a bases-loaded, game-ending double play.

Bethune credited his starter for rising to the occasion in Pittsburgh.

"It was a big start for Stewie in a pressure situation and he was locked in. He carried a no-hitter into the 4th and rarely fell behind hitters. He made pitches in clutch situations when he needed to."

The 14U Titans Head Coach credited big hits by "Drew Doyle, Aarya Kumar, Aiden Stewart, Nate Berg, and Bryson Trichilo in the tightly-contested game. We had timely hits and drew walks in key moments to create some momentum. Bryson had a clutch 2-run single which ended up driving in the winning runs. It was a great piece of hitting."

The key moment in the semi-final and perhaps the turning point of the tournament, according to Coach Bethune, was "Ronan Thompson inducing a double play to record the save. Defensive praise to Aarya Kumar who fielded the ground ball, stepped on his bag, and made a perfect off-balance throw to nab the runner coming home. That play was extremely difficult and created momentum for us heading to the final."

The final was a rematch of the Titans' first game of the tournament versus the #1 seed.

Bethune's ballclub lost to NLB Mid-Atlantic in that opening round robin contest, but the young Titans were undaunted by the task of upsetting a third straight team.

Although the 14U CPBL squad fell behind 3-1 heading into the fifth inning, the Titans received a stellar 4.1 inning, scoreless relief pitching performance from Cole Collura. Bethune expressed his admiration for his young hurler: "Cole pitched to contact with an engaged defense behind him. It was a performance in a big game that I won't forget. I remember him coming off after getting through the 6th inning and he told me, 'I want this, give me the 7th.' He was locked in all game, he was on a mission, and finished off the 7th. Cole was the recipient of a water and ice shower after the game by the team. What an experience; what a performance by Cole."

In addition to Collura's timely performance, Coach Bethune got hitting from up and down his batting order in the 5-3 championship game victory.

"Dominic Williams led us with 2 hits, while Mato and Aiden Lue-Pon each added 1. Michael Ventresca and Aarya Kumar each drew 2 walks and scored 1 run each. Brody Graham and Ronan Thompson each contributed with clutch RBIs to help seal the championship in one of the biggest wins in Titans history."

The franchise leader in games coached summarized the mountain his young team had to climb in the playoffs in Pittsburgh: "All three teams we faced in the playoff round had a combined record of 11-1 after the round-robin. This gritty group went to work and got it done."

By Jim Stewart