

Gibbons and Shepherd provide the power in the 18U Titans' 14-4 walloping of the Ontario Astros

First baseman Noah Gibbons and outfielder Owen Shepherd went deep to back a solid complete game performance by Jack Ferguson as the 18U Titans toppled the Ontario Astros 14-4 in a mercy-shortened CPBL game at St. Andrew's College on Saturday morning.

Mayor Tom Mrakas threw out the ceremonial first pitch of the CPBL contest. Rain washed out the Mayor's first attempt to usher in the CPBL season back on May 7. It was worth the wait. Mrakas's splendid two-seam fastball spun down and away to Titans' third baseman Mitchell Crowley who presented the autographed ball to the Mayor ? an ardent advocate of youth sports in the community.

Crowley is committed to play for the University of Rio Grande Red Storm in September.

He was joined on the infield by fellow veteran Titans shortstop Nolan Thomson and centerfielder Tarek Emara who are committed to the Rend Lake College Warriors and the St. Xavier University Cougars, respectively.

All three US College commits and Head Coach Denis Bailey presented Mayor Mrakas with navy and orange Titans gear in the pre-game mound ceremony.

After bestowing gifts unto the Mayor, the home team received a few gifts of their own from the Astros. The Titans jumped out to a 6-0 lead in the bottom of the first inning in a station-to-station walk-fest.

The 18U squad showed great plate discipline to draw five walks, endure two hit batsmen, and Cameron Nemeth generated a solid RBI base knock en route to a bat-around inning that culminated in 12 Titans plate appearances.

Titans' starter Jack Ferguson did not squander the gift of a half-dozen runs. The powerful righthander?who will be pursuing an engineering degree at Dalhousie University in Halifax in September and suiting up for the Tigers in second year ? induced a ground ball and two flyball outs at the top of the second to preserve his team's six-run margin.

Ferguson noted the importance of that early game result after a pair of mid-week Titans' losses.

?It was important for us to get back on track. We are a good team. I knew I had to induce some strikeouts with my off-speed stuff. Today, we set the tone early and grabbed the lead.?

As patient as the Titans were in the bottom of the first to establish the lead to which Ferguson alluded, the 18U's revealed another dimension to their offence when Gibbons launched a three-run blast over the left-centre field fence at SAC.

The 390-foot bullet gave the 6'4" first baseman 4 RBI in the first two innings and he assessed his prodigious tater.

?I was looking to put a good swing on the ball. It felt good to hit that one and it was great that Shep hit his later to walk them off.?

According to Titans Head Coach Denis Bailey, Gibbons's second inning homer ?was the turning point of the game. That shot would not have been held by many ballparks.?

Crowley, who led off the inning with a ringing double down the third base line, and Saunders Mireault, who had drawn the team's sixth walk?plated on Gibbons's four-bagger. The pesky Astros responded with two runs at the top of the third inning to cut the deficit to 9-2 when Ferguson faltered by issuing three walks, but the Titans' starter induced a hard ground ball to his steady-fielding first baseman Gibbons to quell the visitors' uprising and limit the damage.

Mireault's timely double at the bottom of the third?his second RBI of the game ? pushed Thomson across the plate. Thomson, the Titans' hard-hitting, three-spot hitter from Newmarket, had reached base on a solid one-out single, stole second to get into scoring position, and scored his second run of the game on Mireault's two-bagger to push the Titans' lead to 10-2.

The Astros cobbled together a run at the top of the fourth by turning a rare 3-base Titans' outfield error into their third run of the game, but Ferguson struck out the last two batters of the inning to escape a jam, surrendering only one unearned run. The unflappable Ferguson fanned a total of five Astros over his five innings of work. The visitors added one more at the top of the fifth on a ringing RBI double to cut the Titans' lead to 10-4, but the bottom of the inning featured more Titans' fireworks courtesy of Owen Shepherd.

After Titans' lead-off hitter Justin Fenn drew his second walk of the game, Crowley delivered his second hit and second RBI to increase his club's lead to 11-4. After Thomson popped out to the catcher for the second out of the inning, Mireault delivered another clutch hit, an RBI single, to plate Crowley.

With two out and Mireault in scoring position, Shepherd belted a walk-off home run to mercy the Astros and establish the final ten-run margin of victory. Shepherd described his decisive two-RBI shot over the centerfield fence at SAC and the importance of the victory.

?It came at a key spot. I tried to stay loose during the at-bat. We wanted to compete out there today as a collective. It was great to finish them off because we needed a big win as a team.?

Coach Bailey was pleased with Shepherd's shot and his team's bounce back effort on Saturday morning after two tough losses during the week. Bailey, whose storied coaching career has taken him to the IBL with the Kitchener Panthers, the OUA with the Laurier Golden Hawks, and the CPBL with the Toronto Mets prior to taking the reins of the Titans' big club, felt the keys to victory ?were our starting pitching, good defence, and timely hitting.?

Pitching, defence, and hitting?a timely recipe for perennial success in baseball ably demonstrated by Bailey's 18U Titans on Saturday at SAC.

By Jim Stewart