

River Bandits make playoff push

By Jim Laise

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STRASBURG — The Woodstock River Bandits are making a mad dash to make the Valley Baseball League Eastern Division playoffs, and Wednesday night they took another step by besting East leader Strasburg 5-3 at First Bank Park.

The Bandits (18-21) won for the seventh time in their last nine games behind the strong pitching of starter Ronnie Broyles (2-1) and reliever Chris Ward.

Broyles and Ward, a 6-foot-7 closer, combined to limit the Express (19-18) to two earned runs, seven hits, two walks and a combined five strikeouts.

"I was throwing OK. I guess I was around 80 miles-per-hour [on his fastballs], but it was more a matter of hitting my spots. "[The home plate umpire] was giving me the corners and I was hitting my spots," said Broyles, a Knoxville, Tennessee resident and member of the Roane Community College baseball team.

"Ronnie was efficient tonight," said Woodstock manager Phil Betterly. "He had three pitches and he was able to locate all three of them in the strike zone."

The defeat dropped the Express to one game over .500.

Strasburg plays Aldie in a doubleheader at home Thursday with a start time of 5:30 p.m. for game one. Friday, the Express hosts the Cardinals and then travel to Winchester to close out the season.

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Push

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Should a play-in game be needed to determine the Strasburg seed in the upcoming playoffs, the Express would take on Staunton. The game was postponed from earlier in the regular season, and only goes if needed to break a tie.

Meanwhile, Woodstock now goes about the business of visiting Front Royal on Thursday, coming home to play Charles Town and then visits Aldie to close out the regular season.

The VBL playoffs will begin immediately after the final regular-season games.

While Strasburg is either trying to stave off or pick up ground on Aldie and Front Royal for first place, Woodstock is attempting to catch and then pass Winchester for the fourth and final spot in the East.

Seeds 1 and 4 will play based on records, while squads 2 and 3 will also meet. The higher seed gets the first playoff game at home.

If recent history is any

indicator, Betterly said he likes his team's chances.

"The approach over the last few games has been outstanding," he said. "The way we have executed across the board has been healthy. It's been fun to watch these kids develop."

While Broyles and Ward, who struck out two in 2 1/3 innings of work, were doing the job on the mound, the River Bandit bats kept a heated pace at First Bank Park.

The Bandits, who have averaged about nine runs in their last nine games, scored five earned runs off Express starter Colby Nealy (3-1) and relievers Trevor Farrell and Jared Crescentini. They accounted for nine hits, including two home runs.

"Our guys are going to hit now," said Broyles. "We've got a good offense and eventually shows up each night."

Strasburg starter Nealy went a solid six innings before the Bandit bats got to him in the seventh to lay a five-spot on the Express.

Woodstock put a baserunner on first base in six of the nine innings.

Strasburg got on the scoreboard twice in its sixth. With two outs,

Donovan May led off with a single and then went to second on a wild pitch. Broyles walked Drew Avans, and then Drew Johnson drove both May and Avans home with a base hit and a River Bandit error.

Woodstock had a bigger seventh. Matt Kochler led off with a single and was sacrificed to second. Justin Woods walked and then Will Robbins laced a single to right, scoring Kochler and Robbins. Back-to-back homers by Joey Aiola and Esteban Puerta (his fifth) plated three more runs. The Bandits led 5-2.

Strasburg answered, even after two were out in the bottom of the seventh. Jeremy Musser singled over second base and then Brennon Kaleiwahea poked a double to right to drive in the Express' third run of the game.

Woodstock manager Betterly pulled starter Broyles, who worked 6 2/3 innings. In came Ward to close out the Express.

Robbins and Kochler (each went 2-for-4, with a run scored) and Aiola (3 RBIs) were Woodstock's leading hitters. Drew Johnson picked up two singles for Strasburg.