

HOPPIN' ABOARD the PLAYOFF EXPRESS

NEXT STOP: Nashville . . . or Iowa, depending on how stretch run plays out

McEwing finds a hole with walk-off roller

Forecasts of a champagne storm came to fruition at Dell Diamond Thursday night as 7,016 fans witnessed their Round Rock Express seal a spot in the Pacific Coast League playoffs.

Gritty Joe McEwing directed a routine grounder through the legs of Isotopes third baseman Jason Wood in the bottom of the ninth inning, plating Brian Gordon and nudging the Express to a dramatic 4-3 victory and into the Pacific Coast League playoffs.

"It wasn't the way I imagined it," said McEwing. "I was just trying to put the ball in play. Yeah, I'll take it. It's a good win for us. Any win's a good win."

Round Rock took an 11-game lead over the Oklahoma RedHawks in the American South with 11 games remaining, and though the 'Hawks could still mathematically knot things up, a PCL head-to-head record tiebreaker rule ensures the Express the crown.

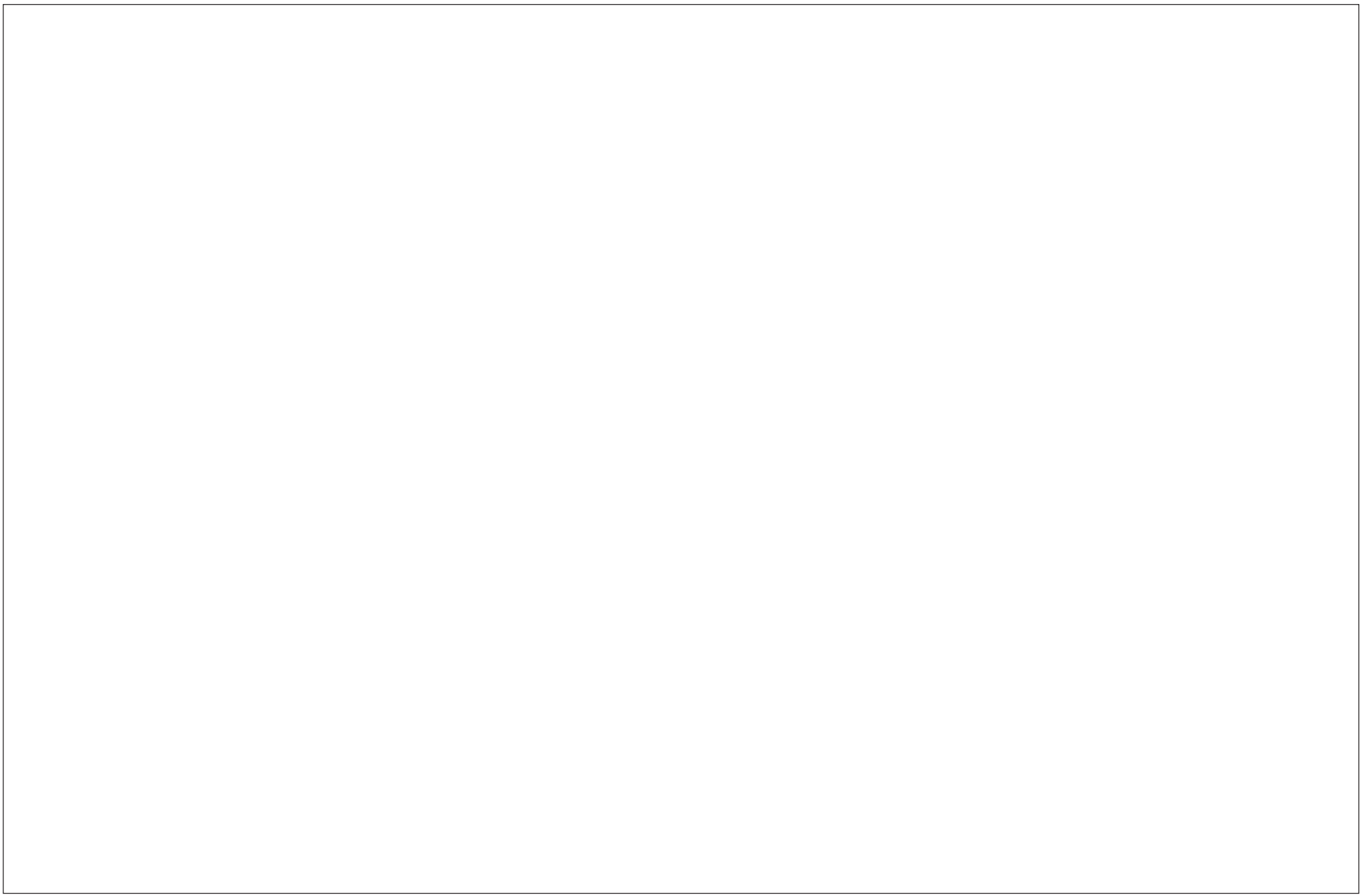
"It never gets old," said Round Rock manager Jackie Moore, sitting in his clubhouse office while his players sprayed champagne and danced in the locker room. "Those guys celebrating right now, they should be celebrating. This is what baseball's all about."

For Moore, the Express' only manager in franchise history, making the playoffs is routine. Round Rock has only missed out on the postseason twice since the franchise's 2000 inception. This the club's first trip at the Triple-A level.

"I'm just happy for these guys, the fans," said Express founder and C.E.O Reid Ryan, son of pitching great Nolan Ryan. "These things don't come along ever year. We've been fortunate. Look at my dad's career. He played 27 years in the big leagues and had one World Series win and went to the playoffs maybe five times."

After a two-run ninth inning rally by the Isotopes, Round Rock nearly had to put its celebration on hold for at least another night.

It was Wood going from hero to goat, singling in the tying run off Express reliever Travis Driskill with two outs in the top of the ninth and botching the routine roller in the



Express manager Jackie Moore (4) gets a champagne shower after his club sealed the American South title with a 4-3 victory over the Albuquerque Isotopes Thursday night.

bottom of the frame.

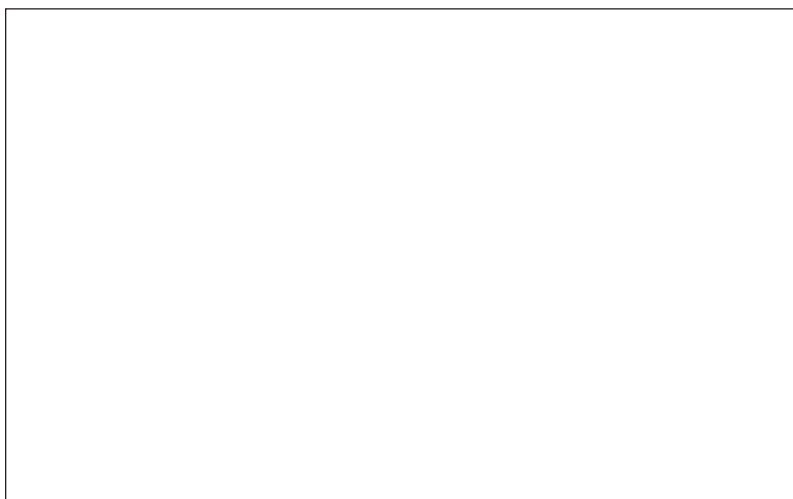
The Express used some clutch hitting of their own to carry a 3-1 lead into the final inning.

Brooks Conrad found left field with a ground ball single in the bottom of the fifth inning, pushing home Derek Nicholson and a sliding Eric Bruntlett for a 2-0 lead.

Nicholson led off the inning with a walk. Next, Charlton Jimerson struck out swinging and a sacrifice bunt by Philip Barzilla pushed Nicholson to second. Eric Bruntlett followed with a walk and McEwing loaded the bags with an infield single grounded deep in the hole at short.

And, with two outs, up came Conrad, whose hit chased starter Josh Stewart, who had struck out five and allowed just three hits in 5 2/3 innings prior to Conrad's knock.

Express starter Philip Barzilla racked up eight strikeouts in six



Brian Gordon trots home to score the winning run in Thursday's PCL American South-clinching victory over the Isotopes.

scoreless innings before handing the ball over to Jalien Peguero.

Barzilla dodged disaster in the sixth when Albuquerque loaded the bases on a pair of hits and a walk. With two outs and Tony

Schrager at bat, the lefty managed to coax a soft fly snagged by Ewing – playing first – in foul territory.

Gordon, pinch-hitting as part of a double switch, tacked on an Express insurance run in the sev-

Round Rock*	W	L	W-L %	GB	Tucson	W	L	W-L %	GB
Oklahoma	79	54	.594	—	Sacramento	81	51	.614	—
New Orleans	68	65	.511	11.0	Las Vegas	75	58	.564	6.5
Albuquerque	66	66	.500	12.5	Fresno	62	71	.466	19.5
	63	68	.481	15.0		54	79	.406	27.5

Nashville	W	L	W-L %	GB	Salt Lake	W	L	W-L %	GB
Iowa	73	60	.549	—	Tacoma	75	57	.568	—
Memphis	69	64	.519	4.0	Portland	70	62	.530	5.0
Omaha	52	81	.391	21.0	Colo. Springs	63	69	.477	12.0
	50	83	.376	23.0		60	72	.455	15.0

* - clinched division title; standings through Aug. 24

Clear-cut MVP emerges from balanced Round Rock club



Michael
Special to the Leader

The first Express trip to Triple-A playoff action, with the deciding games of the first round scheduled for Dell Diamond Sept. 8-10, has been a team effort like no other in franchise history.

There was no spectacular statistical achievement, except for Jason Hirsh's mound mastery, and as a result there would appear to be no obvious team MVP among the position players. But that's not totally true because there is a conspicuous exception we'll get to shortly.

The Express had the league's leading hitter and the league's leading pitcher in its championship inaugural season.

Keith Ginter, the Texas League Player of the Year, was the wire-to-wire batting average leader and Roy Oswalt, who compiled an 11-4 record before leaving to win a gold medal at the Olympics, led the league with an amazing 1.94 earned run average.

Ginter, seen back at Dell Diamond last month with the Sacramento River Cats, had one of the minor leagues' best hitting seasons, a uniformly impressive year that overshadowed even Morgan Ensberg's 28 home runs and 90 RBI. Ginter would go on to hit six home runs in the Express playoff run to the Texas League title.

The 2001 team, whose effort to repeat as Texas League champions was curtailed in the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy, had both the league's Player of the Year, Jason Lane, and in Tim Redding, its Pitcher of the Year.

Redding may have won the league award but it was always solid Travis Smith who led the league in ERA and wins. He's still the Express franchise record hold-

er for victories with 15 and with the promotion of Jason Hirsh, who posted a 13-2 mark before his call-up, Smith should retain the title for another season.

The more-balanced 2002 playoff team was closer to this year's edition. Kirk Saarloos, on the strength of a 10-1 record and a 1.40 earned run average, was the Texas League Pitcher of the Year.

No Express player won the batting title but the team had three of the league's top five average hitters in Royce Huffman, Jason Alfaro and Henri Stanley. Although the team had two or three players in the leaders of almost every offensive category, Stanley was the only actual category leader as he took the extra base hits, triples and slugging percentage titles.

The final Texas League playoff team featured the league's 2004 batting crown and stolen-bases leader in Willy Taveras.

D.J. Houlton turned in an excellent year on the mound, but Ezequiel Astacio, who topped the league in strikeouts, was the only

major category pitching leader.

Hirsh, who should win the league ERA crown, has been this year's Express statistical star.

Chris Sampson and the departed Chris Baker also made major pitching contributions while putting up impressive numbers in their own right. But a team MVP needs to be a player who is on the field more than once every five days like starting pitchers are.

There are multiple MVP candidates but really only one clear choice.

Cody Ransom, leading the team in home runs, despite limited playing time, and Luke Scott, who hit 20 homers in only 318 Express at bats, were the main power producers.

Joe McEwing, playing first and second bases, shortstop and outfield, was the most versatile. He also provided the most unusual batting music as he alternated Frank Sinatra and Jimi Hendrix selections before stepping in to hit.

Royce Huffman would be in the running had he not suffered a late

enth, roping a sharp fly ball to left that was misjudged by Schrager. The hit – ruled a double – plated Jimerson, who reached by walk. That made it 3-1.

Round Rock will face either Nashville or Iowa – currently battling for the American North title –

in the first round of the playoffs, which begin Sept. 6 on the road. Through Thursday, Nashville led the I-Cubs by four games.

The series shifts to Round Rock on Sept. 8. Playoff tickets are still available by visiting rrexpress.com or calling 255-2255.

season injury.

Jesse Garcia, with the best batting music, was sidelined earlier in the year and his temporary replacement, Wade Robinson, was an outstanding substitute.

Pinch-hit specialist Alan Zinter, with one of the league's best RBI per at-bat ratio, and outfielders Mike Rodriguez – steady all season – and Charlton Jimerson – erratic but electrifying – also deserve recognition.

Humberto Quintero is the best defensive catcher in the Astros system. And, yes, that definitely counts the backstops already in Houston. His arm draws the rave reviews from the scouts but he also had an excellent offensive season.

With all due respect to the contributions of the players previously mentioned, as well as all others to wear the team's uniform this year, the 2006 Express MVP is undoubtedly Brooks Conrad.

The scrappy, old-school infielder has played hard and played well all season. His history as a clutch performer has been emphasized

this year with all manner of late-inning dramatics, both at the plate and in the field. He moved from second base, for more than three dozen games at third base, without missing a beat. And he got down and dirty, diving for balls and hustling like every at bat was crucial, all year.

Conrad led the team's hitters in, well, just about everything. But it wasn't just the Express he led in hitting categories. No hitter in Triple-A baseball, and that counts the 14-team International League as well as the Pacific Coast League, has more triples or extra base hits.

Conrad is also in the top three in runs scored and total bases among all Triple-A batters. And no Triple-A player can match his amassing double digit totals in home runs, triples and doubles this year.

So, Brooks Conrad, who shows no sign of slowing down after beginning the current homestand with a game where he had three hits, two home runs and four RBIs, is the walk-off winner as the Express 2006 MVP.