

SPORTS

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Dragons stone Rockwall in Game 3, take series

■ Dragons topple Rockwall in three, advance to regional final

By BOB BRINKMAN
Special to the Leader

WACO — What a weekend to be in Waco. Round Rock, ranked number one in the nation by Baseball Weekly, was facing Rockwall, co-champions in District 9-5A, in their first ever meeting. After a convincing 5-1 Dragons victory in Game 1 Friday night, the Yellowjackets scored a 3-2 upset (see page 8B) in Game 2 Saturday, forcing a third and deciding game. Facing their first elimination game of the playoffs, the Dragons came through with a clutch 8-5 win (see right), paced by a grand slam home run by Chance Wheelless. Round Rock advances to play Plano East, the other co-champion of District 9-5A, in the Region II championship this weekend.

Game 1 at the Baylor Ballpark was a pitchers' duel, as Round Rock's Matt Nachreiner and Rockwall's Michael Stutts carried a scoreless contest into the fourth inning. Nachreiner (13-0) struck out five of the first seven batters he faced, and only two Yellowjackets got on base. The Dragons had four baserunners in the first three innings, including two in scoring position, but could not bring them home. John Danks singled in the first, but was caught stealing second to empty the bases. In the bottom of the first, Jordan Danks laid out to make a diving catch in shallow left to deny the Yellowjackets a hit.

In the second inning, Mike Chambliss beat out a throw from second base for a single, and Nachreiner batted courtesy runner Chris Culpepper over to second on a fielder's choice. Reed Woytek was next to bat, and his single past third base sent Culpepper racing down the third base line. Left fielder Roger Kieschnick threw a rope to catcher Preston Clark, who caught Culpepper sliding in to keep the Dragons off the board.

Round Rock had runners at the corners with two outs in the third, as Nick Peoples and John Danks each singled to right field. Stutts got Travis Schlichting to fly out to center field to end the scoring threat.



Round Rock's bench waits to erupt into celebration as the Dragons record the final out in Game 3 of the Class 5A Region II semifinal series versus Rockwall. Round Rock won the game 8-5, taking the series.



Round Rock's Chris Culpepper (14) is tagged out at home plate by Rockwall catcher Preston Clark during the squads' Region II semifinal series.

The Dragons broke the deadlock in the fourth, as Wheelless deposited the first pitch of the inning over the right field wall

and into the Brazos River for a solo home run and a 1-0 lead. Round Rock scored once more in the inning, as Nachreiner doubled to the center-right field wall

and was relieved on the basepaths by Phillip Hayes. Jordan Danks' chopper toward first deflected off the first baseman into right field for an error that

put Danks on base and scored Hayes from second for a 2-0 lead. Kieschnick doubled to start the fourth for Rockwall and was batted over to third, but Nachreiner got the final two batters to strike out and ground out to shortstop.

Round Rock scored another two in the fifth to take control, as Peoples singled, stole second, and came home as Schlichting ripped a triple to the center field wall. Wheelless hit a sacrifice fly to center to score Schlichting and increase the Dragons lead to 4-0. Rockwall put runners on the corners with two outs, but Woytek ran down Clark's blast to center-left field to keep the Yellowjackets off the scoreboard.

Round Rock added an insurance run in the top of the seventh, as Schlichting walked and scored when Wheelless pulled a shot down the first base line that went through the first baseman's legs for an error that scored Schlichting from first. Rockwall got their only run in the bottom of the seventh as Hunter Blair got aboard on a single and scored from third with bases loaded and no outs. Nachreiner struck out the final two batters swinging.

■ Wheelless slam gets Dragons going in Game 3

By JEFF CASPERSEN
Leader Sports Editor

WACO — While dominant pitching has provided much of Round Rock's postseason punch in 2003 Region II tournament play, the Dragon bats sparked the squad past Rockwall at Baylor University Saturday.

A Chance Wheelless grand slam and Travis Schlichting two-run double propelled Round Rock (33-3) to an 8-5 Game 3 triumph and a berth in the Region II finals against Plano East, which edged The Woodlands in three games the same weekend.

After spotting Rockwall (29-10) a 4-0 Game 3 lead, the Dragons erupted, posting a run in the second and a four-spot in the third inning.

Chance Wheelless delivered the big blow in the bottom of the third off Yellowjackets starter Brett Lewis, depositing a bases-loaded shot over the right-center field wall. The left-handed first baseman jumped on a 1-1 fastball.

"Right before, I kind of got this feeling," Wheelless recalled. "I was thinking, if I hit one, it'd be the best thing. He had to pitch to me."

Round Rock wasted little time relinquishing the lead, starting pitcher Travis Schlichting coughing up a run in the top half of the fourth off a Justin Roland RBI triple.

In the end, however, it was Schlichting who enjoyed the last laugh. After being chased from the game after 3 2/3 innings of work, the senior, normally a shortstop, ripped a two-run double in the bottom of the fourth that put the Dragons up for good. He took third on a throw to the plate, setting the table for a Wheelless sacrifice fly a batter later, the first baseman's fifth RBI of the game.

Wheelless, Schlichting's partner in offensive heroism, relieved Schlichting in the fourth, tossing 2 1/3 innings of shutout baseball. Right-handed pitching ace and Game 1 starter Matt Nachreiner came on in the

See WHEELLESS, page 8B

Not so sweet home: Express drop first two of homestand

By JEFF CASPERSEN
Leader Sports Editor

Though already mathematically eliminated from the first half Western Division race, the Round Rock Express (14-38), 20.5 games behind first-place San Antonio with 18 to play, are hoping to roll a little momentum into the second half.

After a pair of dramatic go-ahead home runs versus the visiting Midland Rockhounds Tuesday night, it appeared the struggling squad was primed to start snowballing that momentum.

Then came the ninth inning and Midland outfielder Brian Sellier. With the bases loaded and Express relief man Travis Wade on the hill and the home squad up 9-8, Sellier poked an opposite field double in the left-field corner, emptying the bases and putting the Rockhounds up 11-9.

That, after a third-inning grand slam by the Express' Eric Cole helped erase a 3-0 deficit and a clutch three-run bomb by Dax Norris in the seventh put Round Rock up 9-8.

"That's just kind of the way the season has been going for us," said Norris. "We're at the point now where we have to play for the second half, but you really want to finish off the first half strong."



Round Rock's Eric Cole (ground) awaits the umpire's call at second base after being caught stealing during Monday's 6-4 loss to the visiting Midland Rockhounds. The Express dropped the series' first two games.

Norris, whose blast was his fourth of the season, noted that, despite the outcome, Wade wasn't throwing the ball particularly bad.

"He was missing a little bit, but you've got to give those guys [Midland] credit. They hit some

good pitches."

Wade (1-2), charged with the loss, pitched 1 1/3 innings, allowing three runs on three hits.

Greg Powell got a rare start for the Express. Normally a reliever, Powell pitched four innings, giving up six runs — four earned — on seven hits. Regularly scheduled starter Ruddy Lugo logged a relief appearance, providing the Express with 3 1/3 innings of two-run, five-hit baseball.

Norris finished the night 2-for-4 at the plate. Center fielder Gavin Wright collected a pair of hits as well, going 2-for-5.

Rockhounds take opener

Midland spoiled the opener of a 12-game homestand for the

Express Monday night, upending the host squad 6-4.

After taking a 1-0 first inning lead, it was all downhill for Round Rock, which surrendered at least a run in each of the second through sixth innings.

Express starter Chad Qualls (1-6) took the loss, permitting five runs on eight hits in five innings.

Midland starter Darvin Withers (2-1) picked up the win, holding Round Rock to four runs on eight hits.

Second baseman Chris Burke led the Express at the plate, going 3-for-5 with an RBI and two triples. Mike Hill finished the night 2-for-4 with an RBI.

Miller a Zephyr

Left-handed starting pitcher Greg Miller was promoted to Triple-A New Orleans Monday.

The Aurora, Ill., native has logged time with every Express team in the club's four-year history.

The lefty was 3-2 with a 5.29 ERA in nine starts. Replacing Miller on the roster is right-handed reliever Cheyenne Janke.

Janke was 0-1 with a 4.31 ERA in nine appearances for the Double-A Tennessee Smokies before being released by the St. Louis Cardinals on May 19. Janke was 12-8 with a 3.48 ERA for New Haven last year.