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Rockhounds carry no-hitter into the eighth

By JEFF CASPERSEN

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For the fourth time in as many seasons, the Round Rock Express found itself on the short end of an Opening Day contest, mustering just a single hit in a 5-0 loss to the visiting Midland Rockhounds Thursday night.

"I don't know why we lose the first game," said Round Rock manager Jackie Moore shortly after the disappointing opener. Moore's squads have rebounded nicely from Opening Day defeats the past three years, logging a Texas League championship in 2000 and postseason appearances in both 2001 and 2002.

"It's not by design," the veteran skipper added. "But we've come back each year and had three good results. It's just one of those things. You try everything you can to break it but hey, there are 139 [games] left."

Overpowering pitching contributed to this year's opening setback. Midland ace Rich Harden (1-0) stymied the Express offense, recording a literally flawless six-inning outing in which he retired each of the 18 batters he faced, nine by strikeout. Harden encountered just a trio of three-ball counts and a single near-hit, the latter coming in the fourth inning when Round Rock left fielder Anthony Acevedo placed a line shot that had extra bases written all over it within a few feet of the foul line in left.

Touted as the Oakland Athletics' most promising prospect, Harden, a 22-year-old right-hander, showcased his immense talent and a fastball that consistently loitered in the mid-90 mph range before the Opening Day crowd of 9,042.

His team up 1-0, Rockhounds skipper Greg Sparks pulled Harden after six innings, sending right-hander Jack Krawczyk out to the hill in relief. After setting down Express second baseman Chris Burke on strikes to start the seventh, Krawczyk nailed shortstop Tommy Whiteman with a pitch,

breaking up the perfect game. An undaunted Krawczyk did recover, however, extending the no-hit bid through seven by retiring both Acevedo and first baseman Eric Cole.

Express third baseman Jason Alfaro finally broke through in the eighth, dropping a sharply-hit liner into left field off Krawczyk for a single to start the inning. Alfaro would reach second base on a sacrifice bunt by designated hitter Dax Norris, but trekked no further.

The Rockhounds poured it on the ninth, plating four runs on three hits, a walk, and a Round Rock error while sending nine batters to the plate against Express relievers Travis Wade and Mike Gallo. Right fielder Matt Allegra pushed the first two runs across, bashing a sharply-hit grounder that hugged the foul line and rolled swiftly past Alfaro at third. Center fielder Steve Stanley collected a two-run single four batters later to up the Midland advantage to 5-0.

Express starting pitcher Chad Qualls (0-1) turned in a solid performance despite taking the loss, allowing just one run and four hits in six innings of work. The right-hander fought off a case of Opening Day jitters, settling down after two-hit, one-run Midland rally in the first. Qualls set down nine straight Rockhound batters after surrendering a second-inning single to designated hitter Freddie Bynum.

“I was nervous the first two innings,” Qualls conceded. “That’s normal for me. I started last year in the opener. I just always get nervous before the first game. I settled down after that and I felt real good. It’s always fun to pitch in close games. I just wish I could be on the other side of it.”

Right-handed relief pitcher Greg Powell worked a pair of hitless shutout innings, relieving Qualls in the seventh. Wade came on to retire one batter in the ninth, permitting four runs — two earned — and two hits. Gallo pitched the final two-thirds of the frame, giving up a hit and a walk.

Notes: With Thursday night’s opening day turnout of 9,042 fans, the Round Rock Express surpassed the two-million mark in attendance in just its fourth season of existence.

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