

The New England League Shines in the Bay State

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THE MENTUS GAME

with Ron Mentus, RLM Athletics

Less than 15 miles north-east of Fenway Park in Boston—perhaps the distance of a towering home run blast by the Red Sox's David Ortiz--sits the town of Lynn, Massachusetts (population

90,000). On this bright and near-perfect day of July 27th, 2011 it played host to the 19th annual New England Collegiate Baseball League All-Star Game.

Held at the historic Fraser Field, home of the NECBL's North Shore Navigators (and a former minor league stadium), the 12-team league sent over 60 of its top players to compete in the contest which pitted its East and West divisions. An estimated crowd of nearly 2,000—including several major league scouts--watched a well-played game conducted on an ideal summer night in the Bay State. Stellar hurling by the East staff stifled the West offense which led to a 3-1 victory.

Anticipation and excitement were sky-high as players and coaches went through their pre-game conditioning, batting and fielding routines. Several of the players became reacquainted with some of their college season teammates who were now league foes as the 2011 season entered its final two weeks.

No, the game didn't count in the standings, but most of the players hardly needed such a reminder. Have fun? Certainly, but it was a baseball game, the score was being kept, there were nine innings to be played and each competitor was intent on helping his side emerge triumphant.

North Shore General Manager Peter Delani was delighted to have played a role in his team being chosen to host the annual NECBL All-Star clash.

"This venue is a great venue," he said with measurable pride. "I think we have one of the better facilities in the league. Our close proximity to Boston and to host the game, it's pretty exciting. We'll have a lot of scouts and cross-checkers here. (This game) gives the best opportunity to showcase (the players') skills.

"We all know, from the league officials down to the GMs and the coaches, this is all about the players. We know that once they get between the lines, their competitive juices are gonna take over. It's our responsibility to try and harness that a little bit and make sure we put them in the best possible situation."

The Coaches:

East head coach Mike Coombs, who helms the league's Newport Gulls, is a former minor league player in the Detroit system. He took the low-key approach with respect to the game's outcome and any inherent strategy.

"I'm going to sit back and watch the boys play and stay out



of their way," he said in a jestful manner. "Because it's all about them and it's their game; they're close to being professionals. So you treat 'em like that, like in pro ball."

West head coach Marty Testo leads the Keene Swamp Bats during the regular season. The 2011 All-Star tilt was the second time he had been named as a coach, and he was happy to have been selected to return.

"It's an honor to be named the head guy," he said humbly. "It's just a reflection of how our guys have played for me this summer, (Keene wound up winning the league title). I'm just gonna tell the guys there's a lot of eyes (scouts) out there; go out and have fun and play as hard as you possibly can. Because you never know, you may open somebody's eyes today."

The Players (East Division):

Eric Jagielo-(LF)-North Shore/Notre Dame: "I definitely feel like (being named to the team) is a big deal. Coming into the NECBL I had very high expectations for the competition and this league has lived up to that. It's an honor to be named an All-Star. It's what you dream about as a little kid. You come out playing and now you're an All-star in this league."

Dario Pizzano-(RF)-North Shore/Columbia: "(Winning the league title in 2010) definitely gave me a lot more confidence. Last year I had an all-right year. But this year I was coming back saying, 'I've been to this party before,' so I've had the experience and I want to be one of the leaders on the team. Being named an All-Star was one of my top goals; when I got the nod I was really excited. It's an honor to be in this game with top recruits and top athletes from top schools around the country."

Justin Wiley-(P)-Laconia/Iona: "It's always nice to go from aluminum bats in school ball to pitching to wood bats...it makes a pitcher smile."

(TRAINING ROOM)

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You try to pound the strike zone and throw strikes; because if you get behind (in the count), you're playing defense. I knew the NECBL was a great league. I got here and I knew I could pitch at this level. Come to find out, I did even better than I thought I could; that's always a positive."

Chris Costantino-(P)-Laconia/Walters State C.C.: "Just try to throw pitches for strikes at all times. If you can do that, that's the name of pitching: commanding your pitches. That's what I live by. To be an All-Star is definitely a great thing. It's very humbling; to be around all these great players is an honor." Costantino, a 49th round draft pick of the Red Sox in 2009, hurled a no-hitter against Keene earlier in the season.

The Players (West Division):

Trey Mancini-(1B)-Holyoke/Notre Dame: "There are a lot of great players in this league from a bunch of different schools across the country. It's definitely an honor to be selected as one of the top players in the league because the competition's really good here. The competition (in the NECBL) is pretty similar to what I play in the college season. It's pretty much the same kind of level. So (being named an All-Star) means a lot."

Tyler Horan-(DH)-Danbury/Virginia Tech: "To be selected with all the rest of these guys, it's a great honor. These are the top guys in



Winning Coach: Mike Coombs • East Division/Newport Gulls



**All-Star Game MVP: Jack Reinheimer
Newport Gulls/East Carolina Univ.**

the league. We'll come in here and (maybe) say, 'Yeah, we're going to take it easy,' but it's the competitive edge that drives all of us. When you get to the plate, you don't want to make an out. You're going to do everything you can to get on base. I feel like it's just another game (as in the regular season)."

Kevin Brown-(LF)-Keene/Bryant: "Coming from a small school, it's a great feeling playing with great players. It's a great opportunity and you make the best out of it, being here with all these guys from a lot of big name schools. A lot of good players are here and I'm glad to be (one of them)."

The Game:

The East jumped to a 2-0 lead in the bottom of the third inning. Catcher Tim Quinn (Old Orchard Beach/Assumption), who had singled, scored on an error by the West defense. A single by second baseman Brett Mollenhauer (Sanford/Radford) plated shortstop Jack Reinheimer (Newport/East Carolina) who had doubled.

The West bounced back in the top of the fifth to reduce the deficit to 2-1. Second baseman Paul McConkey (Holyoke/Kentucky) slashed a double to right-center, which scored Trey Mancini, who had reached on an error. As it turned out, that was the extent of the West's offensive production.

Resuming its previous two-run advantage, the East scrambled right back in the bottom of the fifth frame to grab a 3-1 lead. Right fielder Kyle Johnson (Newport/Washington State) rapped a two-bagger to left field; he moved to third on a fielder's choice and scored the final tally on an RBI grounder by Eric Jagielo.

A quartet of East hurlers stifled the West bats for the remaining four innings. The entire East mound corps allowed but five hits overall and fanned 11 batters en route to the victory. The West garnered seven hits, yet no batter on either side had more than a lone

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safety. AJ Bazdanes (Sanford/Maine) was the winning pitcher, whiffing two batters in his one inning on the mound. The losing pitcher was Nick Williams (Danbury/Tennessee), who allowed two runs on three hits.

The save went to Sam Dodge (New Bedford/Harvard) who allowed but a harmless infield single in stopping the West attack in the ninth inning.

Dodge, who was not used as a closer at Harvard, relished that role with the New Bedford Bay Sox during the season. "First of all, it's an All-Star Game, so we're here to have fun, obviously," he said. "But (that runner on base) made the situation a little more nerve-wracking. We wanted to win for the East side, so yeah, there was (a little more pressure). My best pitch is a curveball; that's definitely what I like to work off the most."

The Most Valuable Player:

Shortstop Jack Reinheimer was accorded MVP honors for his stellar overall performance. Besides swatting a double, the 6-foot, 165-pounder was flawless afield, tabbing four assists and starting a double play to thwart a West rally in the third inning.

"It's very humbling," a modest Reinheimer stated about his award after the game. "I'm speechless. I didn't ever think I'd ever be in this position; it's pretty cool."

Reinheimer was also satisfied that his offense proved productive. "I was seeing the ball. You can always make things happen when you're seeing the ball. Your swing's not always gonna be there, but you just come out and play your best."

Winning coach Mike Coombs upped his All-Star Game record to 2-1, his other win coming in 2008. Coombs, who has been in the league since 2005, has also been the commander of two NECBL championship teams with Newport.

"They give me good players; you keep them in a good frame of mind and make the organization a success," he said.

On July 27, Coach Coombs had all the good players he needed. He must have thoroughly enjoyed sitting back to "watch the boys play."

So for one night near the end of July, in partly cloudy 78 degree weather, Fraser Field grabbed the Bay State spotlight with a splendid promotion of summer league wooden bat baseball. And all it took was two hours and 20 minutes.

Now, what was the name of that famous ballpark in Beantown?

Ron Mentus was awarded Collegiate Baseball's Sportsmanship Award in 2002. He is available to conduct seminars/clinics and accept speaking engagements on the

topics of sportsmanship and character. Contact him at: 203-740-7986 or rlmathletics@aol.com. RLM Athletics is located in Brookfield, CT.

