

WR on cusp of ITCL title

By ERIC MURRAY
Tribune Chronicle

NORTH JACKSON — Western Reserve knocked off the Jackson-Milton Blue Jays, 7-4, in a pivotal Inter Tri-County League, Blue Division game on Tuesday.

With the win, Western Reserve, the returning Division IV state runner-up, has a chance to take the league title this afternoon as the Blue Devils (17-1, 9-1) again host Jackson-Milton. "They always play us tough, and we were fortunate to come out with a win today," Western Reserve coach Ed Anthony said.

Western Reserve starting pitcher Wyatt Larimer pitched strong in the victory, in what was only his third start of the season.

"We had him at a pitch count up around 95 to 100," Anthony said. "That's about the most he has done because of the injury earlier in the year."

Larimer, who allowed two walks in the bottom of the first inning, got out of the jam by striking out three of the five batters he faced.

In the bottom half of the inning, Jackson-Milton starter Eric Ostrowski got into a jam of his own, as he put runners on first and third. A Dom Velasquez chopper to short was too much for the Blue Jays (13-5, 8-1) to handle, which resulted in Walker Marlowe scoring from third.

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The Blue Devils were able to open up the floodgates in the top of the third, as a four-run inning began with a Ryan Demsky pop-up past second base, in which the second baseman and right fielder nearly collided, resulting in a single. A standing double by Larimer put runners on second and third, and then a Marlowe chopper to short led to another error, bringing in Demsky and extending the lead to 2-0.

Jeep DiCioccio hit a sac fly to center field on the first pitch, making it 3-0. A Velasquez line drive to left field scored Marlowe, and then finally, a two-out double by Jake Clark scored Velasquez, extending the Blue Devil advantage to 5-0.

"He (Ostrowski) didn't hit his spots today, everything was up," Jackson-Milton coach Kevin Hogue said. "But, he's pitched in these kind of games over the last two years now. He just couldn't hit his spots today. That's what happens when you face a good hitting team."

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The Blue Jays were able to get into six- and seven-pitch at-bats versus Larimer throughout his five innings of work, but it wasn't until the bottom of the third that Jackson-Milton was able to find their groove. A Sebastian Lay one-out walk, followed by an Ostrowski single, put runners on first and second for Justin Rentz, the free hitter.

Rentz had a line-drive single on a full count, scoring Lay, and finally putting the Jays on the board. Next up was Laster, who hit a hard chopper past second base, scoring Ostrowski.

But, the rally died at 5-2, as a pop-up two batters later was just foul, preventing two runs from coming in.

"They were fighting off the pitches well, it was a good hitting team," Larimer said.

"I knew that the start of their order is a really, really good hitting spot... I just knew if I got past them and kept the pitch count low in the bottom half of the order, I'd be all right," he said.

"Their number two, three, and four hitters are real strong hitters, and when you put seven, eight and nine on, the meat of their order came up with a couple good hits," Anthony added.

Larimer had seven strikeouts, with all of them coming in his first three innings of work.

"I'm very proud of him,

we needed that kind of outing," Anthony said. "The guys really rallied around him. This is by far the strongest outing he's had all year."

Western Reserve added two more runs in the fifth inning, chasing Ostrowski from the game. Leading 7-2 in the bottom of the sixth, Velasquez came in to relieve Larimer.

The southpaw got himself into a jam, as a pair of off back-to-back singles between the first- and second-base gap put two runners on for Jackson-Milton. A Seth Pifer hit-and-run single past third scored Johnathan Volland from second.

Jackson-Milton closed the gap to 7-4 with a bases-loaded single by Ostrowski. However, on the play, Pifer tried to score from second and got thrown out on a diving play at the plate. A chopper to third by Rentz ended the rally, and effectively ended the game.

The two Blue Devil pitchers helped their own cause at the plate as Larimer went 2-for-5 with a double, while Velasquez had a pair of RBIs on a 2-for-3 effort. As for Jackson-Milton, Ostrowski fared better at the plate, as he went 2-for-4 with an RBI.

Western Reserve look to win at home today, and take the ITCL title over Jackson-Milton in the process.

"I feel exactly the same about tomorrow's game as I did today," Larimer said. "Today was huge, but tomorrow's bigger."

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