

MINERAL RIDGE - Fans who missed the former Cleveland Browns players, known as the Kardiac Kids, at the Eastwood Mall last weekend don't need to travel far to see the new version.

Take a trip out to North Jackson to check out the Jackson-Milton baseball team. Sure, it's a different sport, but coach Kevin Hogue says his boys have the same fight in them as the Browns of the early 1980s.

"That's been our motto of the year - the Kardiac Kids," Hogue said with a laugh. "We don't give up."

While the Blue Jays never trailed in their 9-1 victory over Mineral Ridge on Tuesday, they did all their damage with two outs. Every run came with two outs as Jackson-Milton (11-5, 5-2 Inter Tri-County League, Blue Tier) recorded just seven hits but drew seven walks and came through with hits at clutch times.

Eric Ostrowski finished 3 for 5 with three RBIs for the Blue Jays, including a backbreaking, two-run single with two outs in the sixth that pushed the lead to 8-1. Ostrowski, the leadoff hitter, is part of a top of the order that's been deadly for Jackson-Milton.

The first five hitters accounted for five runs, five hits and six walks against the Rams (5-8, 3-4).

"When we've won, we've put the ball in play," said Hogue, now in his sixth year coaching the Blue Jays. "And when we've lost, well, last series against Sebring, we had 32 strikeouts. You've got to put the ball in play, and the kids have bought in. We've gone ahead and changed methods this year, and they really have bought in. It's starting to pay off."

Blue Jays starting pitcher Noah Lester made sure the late runs stood up. He allowed three hits, struck out nine, walked two and didn't yield a run over five innings. A transfer from Austintown Fitch, Lester had to sit out the first 13 games, so this was only his second outing, and he looked stronger as the game went on.

"You get more confidence as you start going down through batters," said Lester, who used a curve to set up his fastball. "I had the batters off their feet, on their toes because I was throwing, probably low 80s, and then coming with the curveball. That kind of broke them."

Jackson-Milton reached the district semifinal last year and Hogue thinks another postseason run is possible, but that's not his focus right now. The Blue Jays are still in the hunt for a conference title, but they'll have to knock off the returning league and district champion, Western Reserve.

"I want to peak now. I want to get Reserve," Hogue said. "You want to peak right now. You want to find out what you got and go from there. Hopefully we'll be OK."

The Rams and coach Andrew Barker are trying to find out who they are as well. Mineral Ridge beat Western Reserve, 7-3, earlier in the year, but it's also struggled against lesser teams. Pitching has been sporadic - the Rams walked 11 batters Tuesday - as has other areas. They ran themselves out of the first inning as a runner was picked off first with two players on and two outs, and they had their issues with passed balls and fielding as well.

It left Barker frustrated because he's seen their potential.

"Some days we play like world beaters, and then we have days like today," he said. "We had too many walks, and then we'd get two outs and they had the top of their order up. Their top four hitters are good hitters, and they come through, so when you walk that many guys and you give good RBI guys a chance, they're going to come through."

Nick Ferguson paced Mineral Ridge by going 2 for 3. The Rams play Lowellville at 5 p.m. today at Cene Park. Jackson-Milton is off until a matchup at Badger on Friday. The Blue Jays have a key series with Western Reserve on Monday and Tuesday of next week.