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TOP STORY

LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL

CLL Gold wins two games to claim city championship

NATHAN ECKER Special to the Daily Sun
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CLL Gold's Brady Condon (18) looks to the umpire for a call during a Little League baseball game Monday at Mark Grace Field in Flagstaff. Photo by Jake Bacon, Arizona Daily Sun

Mark Grace Field was electric on Monday as Continental Little League Gold faced off against the West Flagstaff Little League Serpientes in the 2023 Majors City Championship. After 12 innings and more than four hours of baseball, CLL Gold

emerged with the trophy.

Continental Little League Gold wins the 2023 Majors City Championship, 11-2. They had to win two games tonight to avoid elimination and take home the trophy. They did so and out scored their opponent 21-9 pic.twitter.com/2wYf2re658

— Nathan Ecker (@RealEcker) June 6, 2023

CLL Gold entered the championship on the brink of elimination. Already having lost once to the WFL Snakes, they were a loss away from being sent home. It took back-to-back wins in the double elimination tournament for them to be crowned champions. They won a high-scoring affair in game one, 10-7, and proceeded to win game two with ease, 11-3.

The Gold showed out early in game one. Each of the first three batters got on base via a hit or walk. They did not register another hit in the first inning, though, but were still able to create an early lead in part to patient at-bats and two consecutive hit by pitches. After the opening frame, they led 4-0.

The Serpientes responded with a run of their own in the bottom of the first to cut the lead to three, but the deficit would soon grow again.

Two straight batters walked to begin the Gold half of the second inning. Austin Clouse hit his second double of the game to drive in a run and extend the lead to 5-1. A groundout from Kade Karnbach drove in the next run, making the score 6-1 after two innings.

Clouse hit 3 for 3 with two doubles, three RBIs, two runs scored and a stolen base in game one. He also took the mound as the Gold starting pitcher and threw 87 pitches in five innings of work.

His performance on both ends was key to the first win.

The Serpientes' bats finally woke up in the bottom half of the third inning. Clouse struck out the leadoff hitter. Then the order flipped back to the top and Clouse struggled to find the strike zone. The next five batters reached base and came around to score, tying the game at 6-6. The comeback was aided by two RBI doubles from Aven Adams and Brady Conden.

Clouse was noticeably rattled, but did not back down. He ended the inning with back-to-back strikeouts and proceeded to pitch two more shutdown innings. After the Serpientes rally, Clouse set down the final eight batters he faced.

When he came back out to pitch in the fourth, he made an adjustment. He decided to pitch exclusively out of the stretch, instead of out of the windup. It was a change that allowed him to pitch with more precision.

"That was on me to throw strikes," he said.

From that moment on, the Gold seemed poised to take it all the way. They struggled to get the bats going for a few innings thanks to a good performance from Serpientes pitcher Drake Shafor in the middle innings, though Clouse matched him and his team delivered.

Gold manager Josh Clouse commended his team on their fight and ability to adjust when it seemed like the game could go either way.

"We preach being coachable as your number one attribute as an athlete," Josh Clouse said. "These kids have been coachable, they've gotten better. We challenge them to get better from the first practice to the last out of the last game and if they did that they'd be winners no matter how many games they won or lost."

In the top of the fourth inning the Gold fought back and extended their lead once more. The first two batters, Austin Scholz and Nolan Ramirez, walked to begin the frame. Zach Turley then reached base via an error to load the bases for the top of the lineup. Remi Larsen was forced to pop up to shortstop and then it was Clouse's chance to redeem himself after a shaky third inning.

He did so, smacking a base hit through the infield to drive in two runs. Gold drove in two more and led 10-6.

The Serpientes got one back in the final inning. Dylan Schreiber registered an RBI base hit to drive in another run, but it was not enough as the Gold went on to win.

The Flagstaff Majors City Little League Championship goes to a second game. CLL Gold showed out the bats and took game one over WF Serpientes , 10-7 pic.twitter.com/OZk1IiE0FB

— Nathan Ecker (@RealEcker) June 6, 2023

The game one victory provided even more confidence to a team that was riding high. They won without committing many fielding mistakes and were able to perform in key situations -- an attribute that Josh Clouse has taught all season.

“We teach confidence from the very beginning,” he said. “Everybody learns how to pitch, everybody learns how to be confident on the base paths and in the box, in the field, wherever we put them, and we don’t blink. We come out and we do our thing, we play our game, and if we win, we smile, and if we lose, we smile because we got to play baseball.”

Game two did not feature as many big innings as its predecessor. Offense was hard to come by for both teams until the later parts of the game.

An Austin Clouse base hit in the top of the first would lead to the first run of the game. He advanced to third on a base hit from Levi Brooks and came home to score on a double steal attempt. Brooks was caught between first and second, allowing Clouse to steal home and push the lead to 1-0.

Austin Clouse had another outstanding performance at the plate in game two. He was 2 for 2 with a stolen base, two runs scored, two walks and two RBIs. It was his RBI base hit in the third inning that pushed the Gold up, 3-1.

The Serpientes' first run came at the hands of JT Boeck, who ripped a double into the outfield to score Conden from third. Their next run came in response to the Gold in the third inning. Rudy Galaviz got to showcase his ability on the bases as he came around to score by advancing to every base on a wild pitch, including home. Galaviz's run made the score 3-2.

The Serpientes could not find another run until it was too late. Adams scored their third and final run. After leading off the bottom of the sixth with a base hit, he came around to score on a passed ball. The pitching from the Gold was phenomenal in the close out game.

Brooks started the game for the Gold. He pitched 3 and 2/3 innings, surrendered two earned runs, walked five and struck out 11 batters. In fact, every out that Brooks recorded came via strikeout.

Karnbach got the nod to close out the Gold's season. He entered in relief of Brooks with two outs in the fourth and struck out the first batter he faced. He gave up just one earned run, walked three batters and struck out five.

Overall, Brooks and Karnbach combined for 16 strikeouts and only allowed four hits. It was a performance that Josh Clouse was impressed with.

"That's what put us over the top," he said. "I don't think they had the pitching season they wanted, maybe were a little down on themselves with their pitching at times, but they battled back and we had back-to-back outstanding outings from those two pitchers."

Thanks to a great outing on the mound, the Gold were able to complete the two-game sweep.

For Josh Clouse, the championship was more than just about a trophy. It wasn't just a matchup between teams, but between leagues. The friendly rivalry has always been there between West Flagstaff and Continental Little League, though West Flagstaff has recently seen more of the success.

“For years we’ve been working to get our league better,” he said, “West Flag’s got an awesome league, great coaches, incredible families and players, and we’ve been looking up at them for a while. We decided it was time to change some things we’re doing, coach the coaches, coach the players, and we got better.”

All-star tournaments for several divisions will begin later this month.

MORE INFORMATION



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