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ALERT TOP STORY

LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL

West Flagstaff All-Stars advance to final round of District 1 tournament with win over Continental

NATHAN ECKER Special to the Daily Sun
Jun 30, 2024



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West Flagstaff Little League's Riley Bruce (22) slides safely into second base as Continental's Hudson Alger (50) and Hunter Rusconi (44) reach for the ball during a game on Thursday, June 27, at Mark Grace Field.

Hattie Loper, Arizona Daily Sun

A fiery passion engulfed Mark Grace Field on Saturday afternoon as West Flagstaff and Continental Little League's 8-10 All-Star teams faced off to determine who would advance as the No. 1 seed from group A of the District 1 Tournament.

Both sides eagerly awaited their battle before the game, lining the outfield fences on either side of the field as the first game of the day wrapped up.

When it was finally time to play ball, it was West Flagstaff who dominated all aspects, coasting to a 17-0 three-inning run-rule victory over their crosstown rival. It was also the first of three games on the day in which West Flagstaff and Continental played each other, with both of the league's 11- and 12-year-old All-Star teams going head-to-head in respective tournaments across northern Arizona.

For the second day in a row West Flagstaff served as the home team, turning to Bennett Burcar on the mound.

Burcar allowed a one-out double in the first inning to Continental's Rayland Gillespie, but was able to shut down the threat by initiating soft contact and recording his first strikeout of the game.

The inning then turned over to West Flagstaff's turn to bat, and they took advantage.

Riley Bruce quickly started the bottom of the frame with a base hit and stole second base moments later.

Burcar then reached, scoring Bruce and setting the table for Landon Brown, who beat out an infield single to second base and drove in Burcar in the process. After the first three batters went to the plate, West Flagstaff led 2-0.

Unlike their previous game against Winslow where they started slow and could not create offense, West Flagstaff flipped the script and showed aggression on the base paths.

West Flagstaff stole 14 bases in the game and never let up, forcing Continental to make extra throws.

Continental pitcher Chino Gomez recorded the inning's first out after Brown's hit, but the next nine West Flagstaff batters all reached base and came around to score. They put up 12 runs in the inning while sending 15 batters to the plate.

Boden Kirkman, Vaughn Barber, Cole Jorلمان and Josiah Carver all joined the parade with RBI base knocks. Burcar added with another hit in the inning — a two-RBI triple — and Brown drove in a second run on a groundout to the pitcher's mound.

Burcar retook the mound in the second inning and set down Continental in order with the help of a runner's interference double play. He was strong in his final inning of work as well, striking out the last two batters. In his three innings, he allowed just three hits while walking no one and striking out four.

Continental was unable to hit through their entire 12-man batting lineup, only sending 10 players to the plate.

Meanwhile, the West Flagstaff offense tacked on four more runs in their half of the second inning thanks to patient at-bats and balls driven into the outfield.

A Barber two-RBI triple highlighted the scoring, plating the first two runners who reached base in the inning and extending the lead to 14-0.

Kingston Carrillo and Chance Ragan each had doubles of their own and scored in the inning, marking the 16th and 17th runs for West Flagstaff.

A pair of youngsters in Burcar and Barber provided a spark to the lineup with their days at the plate; Burcar was 2 for 3 with two runs scored and three RBIs and Barber was 2 for 2 with two runs scored and three RBIs.

Brown and Carver followed suit, each recording two RBIs and scoring one run.

West Flagstaff's dominating victory prompted a look into the future of baseball in Flagstaff, with talent from Continental and West Flagstaff proving to be formidable opponents against any other teams in the state.

"Flagstaff baseball is legit," West Flagstaff head coach Gary Kirkman said. "Our high school programs make the playoffs every year and it's cause of Little League. These kids keep playing and it goes into high school and that's what it is. Baseball is a staple in Flagstaff and it starts here in Little League."

Assistant coach Shane Burcar was also impressed with the influx of capable young players who took the field in Saturday's game. In his short time living in Flagstaff, Burcar continues to see a rise in the level of play at the youth level and credits coaches as a main reason. He also hopes that more of the community will come together in the future to support the teams, allowing the players on the field to build connections that will last from Little League through high school.

"The most important thing for a young athlete is coaching," he said. "Continental is well coached. I think we're well coached and the thing I've seen in the five, six years that I've been here is that youth sports keeps getting better every year."

West Flagstaff's victory allows them to rest their legs after three consecutive days of play before traveling to Round Valley on July 3 for the final stage of the District 1 tournament. There they will play the No. 1 seed from group B, either Holbrook or White Mountain. They would need to win just two games in a row to be crowned District 1 champions.

Continental was set to play one more game at Mark Grace Field on Monday against Payson to decide who will reach the final stage as the No. 2 seed from group A.

Other Little League results

The Flagstaff Girls Softball Little League Majors All-Stars team made the final of the District 1 tournament on Saturday, but fell to Round Valley, 9-2. The two teams had split a pair of games on Thursday and Friday, including a 6-4 Flagstaff victory on Friday. But Round Valley won the winner-take-all final to advance to the state tournament.

The FGSL 11u team were set for the final of its district tournament, having split a pair of games with Winslow. Flagstaff beat Winslow in a run fest, 22-15, on Friday, and the teams were set to play in the district championship contest on Monday in Winslow.

The West Flagstaff Little League juniors squad defeated White Mountain, 14-4, on Saturday in Snowflake. WFL was set to visit the hosts, Snowflake, on Monday in the semifinals.

On Saturday, the WFL Majors All-Stars took on their rivals from Continental Little League in Payson. Continental won that matchup, 7-4.

CLL will enter the second portion of the district tournament as the top seed. WFL was set to play Winslow in Payson on Monday to attempt to stay in the tournament.

The CLL 11u squad also beat West Flagstaff on Saturday, 13-0, to advance in the district bracket. They were set to play Silver Creek on Monday. West Flagstaff dropped into the bottom half of the bracket, and will play Winslow in Winslow to try to stay alive.



Gallery: Continental vs Wast Flagstaff Little League game
HATTIE LOPER Sun Staff Photographer Jun 29, 2024

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