

BUCKS WIN FIRST STATE AMERICAN LEGION BASEBALL CHAMPIONSHIP

AT LONG LAST!



TIM KUPSICK/CHRONICLE

The Bucks celebrate their first state title after their 8-3 win over the Billings Royals on Wednesday evening.



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Bucks second baseman Trevor Peck turns a double play.

By TIM DUMAS
Chronicle Sports Writer

BILLINGS — Everyone was waiting. For the one big inning. For the one big moment.

They both came. It was inevitable.

Nearly 80 years after Montana's first champion was crowned, the Bozeman Bucks won their first American Legion baseball title Wednesday night by defeating the Billings Royals 8-3 at Cobb Field.

A seven-run fifth inning helped the Bucks complete an undefeated run through the Class AA Montana/Alberta tournament to extend a dominating season that to date includes 56 victories — 10 more than the program's previous record.

Bozeman outscored its opponents 64-20 for the tournament

and won for the 30th time in its last 32 games. On their way to history, the Bucks totaled 80 hits in Billings en route to a berth in the Northwest Regional tournament that begins next Thursday in Lewiston, Idaho.

"It's a dream come true," a beaming but less-than-100 per-

cent Ryan Minkoff, Bozeman's catcher, said. "We knew we could do it. I can't explain it; it just feels awesome."

His teammates shared that emotion.

"It's never happened in Bozeman before," third baseman Caleb Schlender said, "and it feels great to be the first team from Bozeman to bring it home."

All the Bucks (56-14) needed to steal the Royals' early momentum was their nightly collection of loud pings. On Wednesday, the big inning came just in time: with the Bucks trailing 2-1 and struggling to come up with the key hit.

But after 11 batters and seven hits, Bozeman carried an 8-2 advantage into the bottom of the fifth.

Game over.

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Bucks/

"Every game, we know it's coming," said Gabe Weidenaar, who hit a two-run double in the decisive frame, pitched a complete game on the mound and was named tournament MVP.

"We always have the big inning. We're confident: 'If we don't get it this inning, we've got the next one.'"

Once Weidenaar, who won two tournament games to improve his season record to 11-2, was handed the lead, the Royals were handcuffed, managing six base runners the rest of the way.

Weidenaar struck out nine, including five of the final 10 hitters.

When he fanned a swinging Josh Miller to end the game, it touched off a celebration more than 70 years in the making.

While his team was enjoying the spoils on the field, head coach Mitch Messer remained on the warning track near the dugout. He didn't need to join the party, but he knew full well what this victory meant.

"I tell you what, it's pretty special," Messer said after dodging a cooler full of ice water aimed in his direction. "When you see a group of 18 guys who work so hard and put in the amount of sacrifice that they did — to reach your goal after three long months of baseball — that makes it all worth it."

The expected rally started slowly, when Matt Comer singled to left with one out. It soon blossomed when Sean Potkay singled to tie the game at 2.

Andy Pike followed with a run-scoring double before Minkoff, who played just one inning the night before due to back and hip ailments, knocked in two more runs with a single to make it 5-2.

Even while hobbled, Minkoff stole second and came home on Anthony Rinard's hit. Weidenaar's double later concluded the uprising.

It was all Bozeman needed. "We've done it pretty much every game all season," Weidenaar said. "We just have one big inning where we just break out. Hit after hit."

Potkay, who saw his 18-game hitting streak stopped the previous night, had three hits for the fourth time in five games and won the batting award, ending



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Bozeman's Caleb Schlender smacks a single, one of his two hits.

with 12 hits in 22 at bats for a .545 average.

While Potkay wasn't his usual dangerous self Tuesday night, there were other players who contributed to Bozeman's rare come-from-behind 10-9 victory over the Great Falls Electrics in 12 nerve-wracking innings.

There was Dan Bashore, who moved to Bozeman five weeks ago from the downtrodden community of Grand Ledge, Mich.

"Michigan's down right now, the economy and everything. It was time for a change," he said.

After pitching just four innings all season, Bashore entered Tuesday's game with the Bucks trailing and threw 2½ effective innings. He also stepped to the plate for the first time all season and became a spark in Bozeman's six-run sixth, laying down a sacrifice bunt that was thrown into center field and later walking with the bases loaded to force home a run.

The inning also included a rare sacrifice fly in which Weidenaar scored from second base when center fielder John Reilly made a diving catch. The Bucks eventually overcame a ninth-inning deficit, proving they could win without one of their top performers.

From the first day of the sea-

son, when Bozeman came back to defeat the Electrics twice in the same doubleheader, an inkling that this could be a special summer was hatched.

And as the season continued and the lopsided wins piled up, so did the possibility that this — finally — could be the year the title was won.

"We didn't feel any pressure," Schlender said. "We knew we were a great team and we knew we just had to play our best and nobody could beat us in Montana."

Once Wednesday's final out was recorded, the feeling was hard to describe.

For Minkoff, who received a two-hour treatment before the game, numbness never felt better.

"It's a dream come true. We knew we could do it," he said. "I can't explain it; it just feels awesome. My back was killing me, but once I got out there, the adrenaline's going and you just want it so bad, you don't even feel it."

For Messer, it was all familiar. A decade ago, he helped his Rapid City, S.D., team twice gain a berth into the World Series as a player. But breaking new ground in a city longing for a winner may top his feats on the field.

"It's special for the community of Bozeman," he said after caressing his infant daughter.

"It's extra special for Bozeman baseball."

Bozeman 8, Billings Royals 3

Billings Royals	011	000	010	—	3	7	2
Bozeman	001	070	000	—	8	14	2

John Kent, Shane Wanner (4), Benjamin Houghton (4), Dillon Mitchell and Robert Stabio; Gabe Weidenaar and Ryan Minkoff. W — Weidenaar. L — Kent.

Billings Royals — Kelly Vannoy 1-5, Marice Burrough 1-4, Dillon Ness 0-3, Gerald Schmaing 0-1, Mitchell 0-0, Joshua Miller 0-1, Stabio 0-3, Devon Hedin 1-3, Anthony LaGaly 2-4, Matthew Edwards 1-3, Joshua Link 1-4, Adam Ketterling 0-3, Kent 0-0, Wanner 0-0, Houghton 0-0. HR — none. RBI — Vannoy 1, LaGaly 1, Edwards 1.

Bozeman (56-14) — Weidenaar 2-5, Matt Comer 2-5, Caleb Schlender 2-5, Sean Potkay 3-5, Andy Pike 1-5, Minkoff 1-3, Tanner Newman 0-4, Anthony Rinard 1-5, Trevor Peck 2-5. HR — none. RBI — Weidenaar 2, Potkay 2, Pike 1, Minkoff 2, Rinard 1.

Late Tuesday box

Bozeman 10, Great Falls Electrics 9 (12)

Great Falls	021	011	022	000	—	9	15	5
Bozeman	001	016	001	001	—	10	11	4

Tyler Fayden, John Reilly (6), Shaun Tatarka (9) and Tyler Brinka, Ethan Hortick (9); Anthony Rinard, Dan Bashore (6), William Spears (8), Tanner Newman (10) and Ryan Minkoff, Tanner Newman (2) and Rinard. W — Newman. L — Tatarka.

Great Falls Electrics (37-32) — Shaun Tatarka 2-5, Jake Meierhoff 1-5, Zach Semenza 3-6, Tyler Fayden 1-7, Ryan Beecroft 2-5, Tyler Brinka 2-4, Nick Taylor 0-0, Ethan Hortick 0-1, Casey Johnson 1-5, Taylor Shanahan 0-1, Hunter Carlyon 1-5, John Reilly 2-5. HR — Semenza. RBI — Semenza 3, Meierhoff, Beecroft, Johnson, Carlyon, Reilly.

Bozeman (55-14) — Gabe Weidenaar 1-6, Matt Comer 3-5, Caleb Schlender 1-5, Sean Potkay 0-5, Andy Pike 1-6, Ryan Minkoff 0-0, Chris Schmidt 0-0, William Spears 0-1, Brendan Phillips 0-1, Tanner Newman 2-5, Dan Bashore 0-0, Anthony Rinard 2-6, Trevor Peck 1-4. 2B — Comer, Peck. RBI — Rinard 3, Peck 2, Bashore, Comer, Weidenaar.