

July 21 Babe Ruth SNJ 15-year-olds: Nottingham shut down in opener



Nottingham's Shane Plunkett looked like he was out after getting caught in a rundown, until the Northern Burlington fielder dropped the ball to give Plunkett continued life on the bases (Photo by John Blaine/purchase photos by e-mailing jbsportsphoto@aol.com).

Gakeler throws Nottingham for a loop with his deuce

By Rich Fisher

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July 21: Zack Gakeler added a little something to his arsenal since he last saw Nottingham.

It's called a curveball, and it stole the show tonight.

Gakeler fired a three-hitter with 10 strikeouts and completely shut down Nottingham in pitching Northern Burlington to a 12-1, six-inning win in tonight's Babe Ruth SNJ 15-year-old state game at Veterans Park.

Northern Burlington advances to play Hamilton Saturday in a game that has been re-scheduled from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

The last time Gakeler faced Nottingham, he was pitching for Bordentown in the District 12 Little League Tournament.

"When I was 12, they beat me 15-14 or something like that," Gakeler said. "Back then I only had a fastball and a change-up. I started throwing a curve last year during travel ball."

And that was not good news for this particular Nottingham team, which has had trouble hitting the deuce from most pitchers. Tonight they came up against one who uses it as his out pitch.

"My coaches saw them earlier and said they had trouble with it and I scrimmaged against them with my travel team and they weren't really hitting it," said Gakeler, who pitched for Northern Burlington High School's varsity as a freshman. "That's my best pitch to command. I don't throw hard

enough to blow it by them so I have to set (the fastball) up.

“I was pretty much just trying to jam them inside and go soft outside and see if they chased.”

They did just that, as Nottingham was never in the game.

“He absolutely dominated us,” manager Jeff Plunkett said. “He threw a tremendous game. He’s got great poise, great composure and certainly has a lot of courage and confidence to throw his breaking ball at any time.”

Northern struck for an early 3-0 lead and broke it open with a five-run fifth. Nottingham got its only run in the bottom of the fifth when a walk and consecutive singles by Shane Plunkett and Craig Buczynski plated a run, but that would be it.

The Columbus crew secured the 10-run rule with four more in the top of the sixth and Gakeler retired the side in order to end it.

When asked if he has worries about his team hitting the breaking ball, Plunkett said his main concern is just winning at this level.

“We haven’t won a state game now in two years,” the skipper said. “I’m at a loss to figure that out. And we need to do that. We need to get a win in the state to change it around .

“That being said, they absolutely dominated us tonight in every aspect of the game as far as approach at the plate, as far as poise on the mound and also handling the moment. I don’t think we handled the moment – a night game at home on the first game of the tournament – very well, to be honest.”

The loss drops Nottingham into the loser’s bracket, where it will play either Ewing, Delran or Waretown on Sunday at 12:30. The Vets Park gang needs to win six straight games to claim a state title, one less to advance.

“The lucky break that you catch is that three teams are going to advance meaning (Mid-Atlantic host) Hamilton is going and now two others,” Plunkett said. “We certainly have enough arms to advance to the final and with an 11-team tournament you also catch another break that there’s days off early. We don’t play until Sunday.

“If it was less than that it would be compacted in a shorter period of time and it would put more strain on the pitching. Can we survive and advance? Yeah, we can, but we certainly need to pitch it better and we need to get a win.”