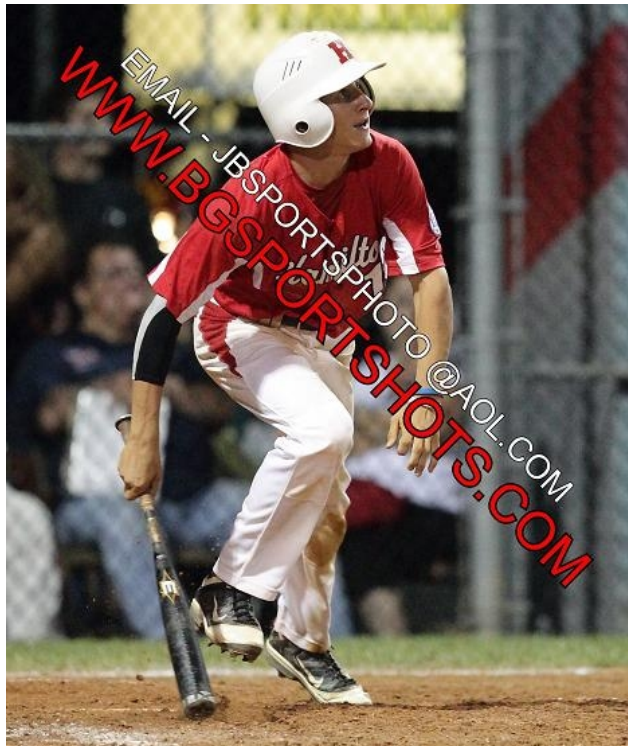


Aug. 5 Babe Ruth Mid-Atlantic Regionals: Hamilton two wins away from the big show!



After watching his eighth-inning grand slam clear the left field fence to break tonight's game wide open against Niskayuna, Dan Garcia was mobbed by happy teammates once he reached home plate (Photo by John Blaine/purchase photos by e-mailing jbsportsphoto@aol.com).

Hamilton 15s use eighth-inning explosion to tame stubborn Niskayuna

By Rich Fisher
Fish4Scores.com

Aug. 5: The Hamilton Babe Ruth 15-year-old All-Stars entered tonight's game with Niskayuna needing four wins to reach the World Series.

They exited it needing just two after taking an 18-10, eight-inning marathon that stretched over three hours and ended just prior to midnight at Switlik Park.

By virtue of the victory, Hamilton finished 4-0 in pool play and got a bye into Saturday's 4 p.m. semifinal game against the winner of Saturday morning's quarterfinal between Frederick and Manasquan.

Dan Garcia, Luke Westerberg and Nick LaBelle were the offensive stars on a night when Hamilton collected 16 hits and 12 walks while slugging three home runs.

Hamilton blew leads of 7-0 and 9-2, and the Western New York team tied it in the seventh with a two-run homer. But the hosts exploded for eight in the top of the eighth to win it.

"That team was tough," said Garcia, who was 4-for-5 with a walk, four runs scored and an eighth-inning grand slam that broke it open. "They battled back in the seventh against Maryland so we knew that the game was never over.

"After that home run in the seventh, the momentum was on their side but it just fired us up for the eighth."

Had they lost, the Switlik Gang would have faced the plight of Niskayuna, which must beat Ewing Saturday morning to gain a semifinal game with Tri-Township, Pa., Saturday night.

"This is really big for us," said catcher Luke Westerberg, who was 3-for-3 with three walks and

four runs scored. "Now we don't have to play two games tomorrow, we get to rest and let the other team play."

"This is big," agreed manager Ralph Mastrangelo. "It saves our pitching, that's important in this tournament. It's big for us to get a bye."

Especially considering how long this game went. It started out like Hamilton might win by the 10-run rule after scoring four in the first and three in the second for a 7-0 lead.

Joe Paragone helped the cause with a two-run homer in the second and Nick LaBelle had a two-run single in the first that started him off on a 3-for-4 night with five RBIs.

Niskayuna, however, is a team that can score in bunches. It got two back in the second but Hamilton got them right back in the third on Westerberg's two-run single.

In the fourth, the New Yorkers made it 9-8 with six runs, although the last three were unearned due to an error that could have ended the inning. Hamilton got one back in the sixth on LaBelle's RBI single and it was 10-8 entering the bottom of the seventh.

LaBelle, who entered in relief in the fourth, allowed a single and home run to start the frame. At that point, Westerberg had a chat with his pitcher.

"I just went out there and tried to calm him down," the catcher said. "I told him he's on the mound for a reason and he just battled back and threw some strikes."

That he did. LaBelle sucked it up, regained his composure and got three straight outs to send the game into extra innings. The hurler showed some previous mental toughness by getting out of bases loaded jams in both the fourth and sixth.

In the eighth, Niskayuna, turned to its fifth of seven pitchers it would use on the night, and he walked Westerberg, Paragone and Johnny Mastrangelo to open the frame. It was the third straight walk for Westerberg.

"I don't think I saw one good pitch to hit my last three at-bats," he said. "I just tried starting it off in the eighth, and tried keeping everybody up in the dugout. I knew if we could keep in it we would win the game."

With the bases loaded, pitcher No. 6 entered and proceeded to walk LaBelle and Tyler Barlow to make it 12-10. After a strikeout, Garcia flexed his muscles on a 2-1 pitch by slugging a grand slam over the left-centerfield fence.

"With a runner on third, I was trying to hit a fly ball to score the run and it just carried," Garcia said. "The 2-0 pitch was one I should have jumped on but I told myself before that at-bat I was taking a strike, knowing how many balls were thrown before."

Hamilton wasn't done yet, as Paragone walked and Mastrangelo hit his second homer of the regionals to complete the scoring. Kevin Smiegocki pitched a scoreless eighth to end it.

"We fought back," Ralph Mastrangelo said. "They gave us some walks and set the tone for what was gonna happen. We just took advantage of it."

"Obviously, we told them 'Make you throw strikes.' If they're gonna give us the walks we'll take them."

The game featured a total of 23 walks, and Westerberg had an unbelievably long night blocking balls in the dirt behind the plate. He also made a diving catch on a pop-up that he initially over-ran, and picked a runner off third base when there was just one out to defuse a rally. And in reaching base six times, he also ran around a lot.

"I can't even describe how tired I am," he said. "I'm just trying to play my best baseball, get on base and do what I can do to contribute to the team."

Garcia has also been contributing on a regular basis out of the leadoff spot.

“I just try to get good counts to hit in,” the third baseman said. “I’m just going to the plate, trying to put the ball in play and it is working for me.”

And Hamilton is working its way toward a possible World Series berth in Jamestown, N.Y.

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Mastrangelo said he will probably start his son, Johnny, in today’s game . . . Gerry Gomez and Paragone each scored three runs and Smiegocki drew four walks . . . Frederick plays Manasquan at 10 a.m., Ewing meets Niskayuna at 1, Hamilton plays at 4 and Tri-Township plays at 6. Both pool champs finished 4-0.