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Curacao wins 2008 Junior League World Series in Taylor

Alexander Rodriguez stroked a three-run home run in the bottom of the fifth inning to give Willemstad, Curacao, a 5-2 victory over Hilo, Hawaii, in the championship game of the Junior League World Series on Saturday in Taylor, Michigan.

Curacao, the Latin America champion, became the first team from the Netherlands Antilles and the first team from the Caribbean to win the world championship for 13- and 14-year-olds.

The Junior League World Series was founded in Taylor in 1981 and has been played at Heritage Park ever since. The Pabao Little League of Willemstad was 6-0 during its first appearance in the weeklong tournament, which attracts regional and national champions from all over the world.

Rodriguez's blow over the center field fence scored Darren Seferina and Sherman LaCrus and broke a 2-2 tie. It was his third home run of the series and the second homer of the game for the all-stars from Willemstad. In the second inning, LaCrus smashed a home run to left field with Shurenley Daantji on base to give Curacao a 2-1 lead over Hawaii. It was LaCrus' fifth home run and gave him 13 runs batted in and a slugging percentage of 1.600. All three totals led the 2008 World Series.

Rodriguez, who is 14, also was the winning pitcher for the second time of the series. He gave up two runs and four hits, walking two and striking out five in 5 2/3 innings. He was removed in the sixth because of the Little League pitch-count rule that limits pitchers to 95 pitches. Ezequiel Garcia pitched one-hit ball the rest of the way.

"It feels good," Rodriguez said as his team celebrated. "I'm proud."

Hawaii went up 1-0 in the first inning when Ridge Hoopie-Haslam singled, stole second and scored when Jayce Carvalho was safe at first on an infield error.

After Curacao went in front on LaCrus' home run, Hawaii tied the score in the top of the third when Kean Wong was safe on a fielder's choice, moved to second on a ground out and scored on a single by Taylor Goo.

The score remain knotted at 2-2 until the bottom of the fifth when Seferina and LaCrus walked and Rodriguez followed with his homer.

Curacao players were used to playing in the spotlight. Five of the current players were part of the 2005 Curacao team that won the Caribbean championship and finished second to Ewa Beach, Hawaii, in the Little League World Series for 12-year-olds in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. The next year, nine current players were in the 2006 Little League series that went 1-2 in Williamsport.

Johannes Gregorius, who was Curacao's manager for the first time this season, said the experience in the Little League series helped, but the fact that the players were well-prepared for the Junior League series was more important.

"For me, this was a great thing and it was a great thing for the players," Gregorius said. "It was very exciting."

Gregorius had to rely on his coaches, Norwin Moesqu and Rodney Carolina, to run the team in the International championship victory over the national champions of Mexico from Boca Del Rio, Veracruz on Friday and again in the World Series finale. Gregorius was suspended by the Little League Baseball and Softball Tournament Committee, based in Williamsport, for using an ineligible pitcher in Curacao's victory over the Philippines on Thursday.

Gregorius said the suspension did not diminish from the team's accomplishment.

"I told my players I did something wrong," he said. "If they punish me for it, do it (win the World Series) for me and do it for yourselves. Our coaches did a good job, too."

Hawaiian players were disappointed after the loss. It was the fifth straight time a team from Hawaii played in the World Series in Taylor. Last year, Pearl City won the world championship.

"When the last out occurred, the whole team just shut down," Carvalho said. "Nothing in the world will make us better. We just have to use it as positive motivation to go for something more.

"It was a good run. We worked hard just to come here. We just fell short. We were one game away. We represented the state of Hawaii well. I will always love this team no matter what. We're brothers on this team. I love my brothers."

Hoopie-Haslam, who hit .333 during the series, said he has not experienced losing while playing for Manager Kaha Wong and finishing runner-up was difficult for him. He said the players worked hard to win the Hawaii state championship, USA Western regional title and USA championship Friday night in a come-from-behind 6-5 victory over Johnston, Iowa.

"Things can't go our way every time," he said. "We went a long way and had a good summer together. I hope the people in Hawaii are proud of our accomplishments."

During closing ceremonies of the World Series, Wong thanked the World Series volunteers and the city of Taylor and then made a vow to return to play again next year.

"Being United States champion and second in the world ain't too bad," he said. "A lot of other guys would like that. I've got eight guys coming back. We'll be back."

Watch the Replay

If you didn't catch the championship game live at Heritage Park or on ESPNU, you have one more chance to see the game on TV. The JLWS championship game will be presented on ESPN2 at 2 p.m. August 26.

Home Run Derby

The Best Buy World Series Home Run Derby, held Saturday afternoon, was won by Brent West of Mechanicsville, Virginia, who hit eight home runs.

Tommy Jenkins of Canton, Massachusetts, was second with seven homers. Fabian Ojeda of Mexico was third with five.

Best Buy, the major sponsor of the Junior League World Series, presented the prizes to the top three finishers.

Friday was Best Buy Day at the World Series. Best Buy employees, who volunteered throughout the week at the series, presented World Series Director Greg Bzura with a large financial donation. Best Buy staff also sang The National Anthem and threw out the ceremonial first pitch. Employees also passed out free T-shirts to the crowd much of the week.

"Best Buy has become a wonderful partner of the World Series in Taylor," Bzura said. "Their donation to the series was the largest to date. It blew me away. And that was in addition to the countless volunteer hours they gave us throughout the week.

"It takes hundreds of volunteers to pull off the World Series and they all came through again this year. I can't thank them enough."

Umpire of the Year

Fred Runyan of Centennial, Colorado, is the 2008 recipient of the McAllister Umpire Award. The award is given to the umpire who exemplifies the spirit of being a volunteer. The award is named for the late Chuck McAllister, who was the umpire in chief of the World Series until his death in 1999.

Current Umpire in Chief George Glick said Runyan has umpired for 30 years in local leagues in his area and at the USA Southwestern regional tournament in Colorado. He has mentored his son as an umpire for seven years and other young umpires.

Runyan is an emergency medical technician and serves as an instructor of the American Red Cross, National Safety Council and the American Heart Association. In his spare time, he is a Boy Scout leader, having received many awards for his service.

He and others are credited with talking their local community into donating green space to the local Little League. At that point, Runyan spent two weeks creating a proper playing surface and installing dugouts and fencing.

"To this day, when he drives by, he knows he did something special for his kid and kids for the next 20 to 30 years," Glick said. "He truly makes a difference."

Taking Care of Business

Debbie DeMoisey admitted she would be lost without the many local businesses that provide lunch for the players and coaches that visit Taylor for the Junior League World Series.

DeMoisey, who has been volunteer team assistant for the World Series for the past 12 years, is responsible for working with the host families to ensure that visitors are taken care of and know their way around the tournament.

The World Series is responsible for housing and feeding at no cost all of the players and coaches. The Ramada Inn of Taylor is the host hotel. DeMoisey arranges the meal schedule for the 140 or so players and coaches.

She said breakfasts are provided by the hotel. Lunch and dinner are coordinated by DeMoisey, who works with local businesses on lunches and with Chef Barney of Taylor to serve dinner.

In that effort, she relies on such businesses as Texas Roadhouse, Bulk Food, Culver's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Hooter's, Fire Mountain, Mancino's, A & W, White Castle, the Eureka Road Arby's, Jet's Pizza, Flamingo's, the Northline Road Burger King, Leon's, Domino's and Dominick's party store, all from Taylor, as well as Downriver Coney Island of Southgate.

The members of the Taylor Moose Lodge also provide lunch for two days.

"Without the vendors, I wouldn't be able to do my job," said DeMoisey, who lives in Romulus and is a clerk for that city's Department of Public Works. "Because of them, the kids and the coaches were fed well."

Six Years and Counting

Organizers of the Junior League World Series can count on one thing every year: Danny Gilreath will be back for a visit.

Gilreath managed the Cartersville, Georgia, team that won the world championship in 2002. He has returned to Taylor faithfully every year since – six years and counting.

Gilreath said he loves returning for the series to admire all of the passion of the volunteers who make the series happen. He said he admires Greg Bzura's ability to get so much help when organizers of the USA Southern regional tournament held in Cartersville sometimes struggle to get volunteers.

When a committee member in Cartersville claimed it would be impossible to get scorekeepers to keep track of balls, strikes, runs and outs for teams from outside the area, Gilreath said he stood up and talked about the Taylor volunteers who sell admission tickets, wash uniforms and do all the tasks necessary to make an event a success.

"That's why I come back every year," he said. "I want to show a little bit of appreciation for what you all did for our kids. I still get chills when I watch that championship game. It's just unreal."

Gilreath's team of 13- and 14-year-olds was the first to win six games without a loss. In the championship game, the Cartersville boys went to extra innings to defeat the national champions of Panama, 3-2. From the time they formed the all-star team to the day of the World Series finale, the players on that team went a perfect 18-0.

Most of the players from that team are now in their 20s and in college. Gilreath's son Tyler was a key member of the 2002 team, batting .455. He had two college scholarship offers, but never played baseball at that level. Today, Tyler runs his own landscaping company.

"I only had 11 players that year and they're all doing well," he said.

Gilreath is considered an icon in Cartersville. He owns Gilreath Carpet Inc. – Cartersville is part of the "carpet capital of the world," after all. In his spare time, he is an assistant coach at Cartersville High School. He said Cartersville High's Donovan Tate is projected to be a top five pick in the Major League draft.

Gilreath expects to return to Taylor again next year for the World Series.

"These are the nicest people in the world," Gilreath said. "I stick to my story: If I ever get kicked out of Cartersville, I'm moving to Taylor."

Same Time Next Year? Not Quite!

The 2009 Junior League World Series will start on August 16 – the same day the 2008 series ended.

Bzura said the JLWS always starts 22 days before Labor Day. And Labor Day 2009 isn't until Monday, September 7.

FINAL POOL STANDINGS

USA Pool

Hilo, Hawaii (West) 3-1

Johnston, Iowa (Central) 3-1

Mechanicsville, Virginia (South) 2-2

Canton, Massachusetts (East) 1-3

Alvin, Texas (Southwest) 1-3

International Pool

Willemstad, Curacao (Latin America) 4-0

Boca Del Rio, Veracruz (Mexico) 3-1

Manila, Philippines (Asia-Pacific) 2-2

Coquitlam, British Columbia (Canada) 1-3

London, England (Europe/Middle East/Africa) 0-4

International Championship Game: Willemstad, Curacao 10, Boca Del Rio, Veracruz, Mexico

USA Championship Game: Hilo, Hawaii 6, Johnston, Iowa 5

World Championship Game: Willemstad, Curacao 5, Hilo, Hawaii 2

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