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Tampa, Florida defeats Chinese Taipei to win 2011 Junior League World Series in Taylor

The Palma Ceia/Bayshore Little League all-stars of Tampa, Florida, are the champions of the 2011 Junior League World Series in Taylor, Michigan.

The USA champions defeated the International champs from the Shing-Ming Junior League in Taoyuan, Chinese Taipei, 2-1 on Saturday, August 20, to win the world title for the 13- and 14-year-old division of Little League baseball.

In a World Series finale televised live on ESPN2, Tampa first baseman Patrick Kiszla hit a two-run home run in the bottom of the second inning to put his team up, 2-0. The 345-foot shot scored right fielder Trent Wessell, who had singled with two outs.

After the game, Kiszla said that he hit a “put a good swing” on a fast ball from Taoyuan pitcher Chen Fei Lin. Kiszla admitted being a “little nervous” going up to the plate, but had a “good at-bat,” hitting the ball out of the park on a three-ball, one-strike count.

Later, Chinese Taipei Manager Chun Yu Wang said the home run pitch was the only mistake his team made all game.

Chinese Taipei came back with one run in the top of the fourth inning when right fielder Hung Yuan Lin hit a two-out single, advanced on a walk to pitcher Lin and scored on a double by first baseman Chin Ou. Pitcher Lin and Ou were stranded at second and third, respectively.

Other than that, the game was pretty much a pitchers duel. Lin limited Florida to four hits and struck out six. Florida starter Jake Woodford, who pitched a three-hitter over five innings, gave way to reliever Kiszla, who retired all six batters he faced in the sixth and seventh innings. Kiszla struck out Yu Chieh Kao and Chuan Yu Hsu to end the game.

World Series founder and Director Greg Bzura said the championship game was one of the greatest of all time.

“I’ve been here all 31 years and I can say that this was probably the best final game we have seen,” Bzura said. “Somebody has to lose and it is what it is. We now have a new champion and it is Palma Ceia, Florida.”

“One heck of a week”

Tampa finished post-season play with a 23-0 record. The team arrived as the state champions of Florida and the USA Southeast regional champs in the Junior League and then went 6-0 in Taylor, winning the USA championship as well as the world title.

It was the second Junior League world championship for the Palma Ceia/Bayshore Little League. In 2004, the same league won the World Series by defeating the Latin America champs from Punto Fijo, Venezuela. That year, the Tampa all-stars also went 6-0 – making the league’s record 12-0 in World Series play.

Ronnie Ramirez, who played shortstop and pitched for Tampa, said his team was inspired by the Palma Ceia/Bayshore sign on the Row of Champions leading to World Series Field.

“When we first got here, we went to Champions Row, pointed to the sign, took a photo and sent that to the team that won in 2004,” Ramirez said. “We wanted to give them another championship.”

Teams from Tampa have played in Taylor four times and have won the World Series each year. The famed Belmont Heights Little League team that featured future Major League players Gary Sheffield and Derek Bell won the title in 1982 with a 3-0 record. The Tampa Bay league became world champion in 1985 with a 4-0 record.

During each of those earlier years, the Junior League consisted of only 13-year-old players. The division expanded to include 14-year-olds in 1999, which led to a growth in international teams.

The win by Tampa this year thwarted an effort by the team from Taoyuan to win the second straight Junior League world title for Chinese Taipei. A team from Taipei City won the tournament in 2010 – the first time a team from Chinese Taipei had entered a squad in the Asia-Pacific region.

Chinese Taipei finished the World Series 5-1. The team came to Taylor from 7,500 miles away and finished first in the International Pool with a 4-0 record, then defeated runner-up Maracaibo, Venezuela, 3-2, in a 10-inning game for the International championship. It was the second victory of the week for Chinese Taipei over the Latin America champions. Four days earlier, the two teams went 14 innings before Chinese Taipei won, 4-1.

Also in the International Pool were the regional champions of Europe, the Middle East and Africa (EMEA) from Emilia, Italy, plus the national champions of Canada (Surrey, British Columbia) and Puerto Rico (Yabucoa).

Tampa finished 4-0 in the USA Pool and defeated second-place Tucson, Arizona, 4-0, for the USA championship.

Other teams in the USA Pool were Johnston, Rhode Island; North Canton, Ohio; and Rosenberg, Texas. This year marked the first time a team from Rhode Island played in the Junior League World Series, bringing the total to 29 the number of states that have competed in Taylor.

Players, coaches and fans of the team from Tampa were ecstatic with the world championship.

“It feels good,” said lead-off hitter Ramirez, who led Tampa with a .478 batting average, hit two home runs, scored 11 runs, knocked in seven runs and won two games pitching. “We knew we had to come out and play. It was fun and I feel I did my best.”

His father, Tampa Manager Jorge Ramirez, called the World Series championship run “one heck of a week.”

“This is a special group of boys,” he said. “They’re very unselfish. They played for each other and they played as a team. They never lost faith in each other and here they are sitting as world champions.”

He said the team excelled because of “solid defense, great pitching” and the ability to have a “different guy” step up and have a big game every day. He used Kiszla as an example, saying he not only hit the key home run, but also pitched great.

In addition to complimenting the play of his son, Ramirez said team leader Jake Bak inspired his teammates, Cole Gibbs cam through with some big hits and catchers Ryan Ellis and Carter Leslie provided a strong backstop tandem. Ronnie Ramirez, Gibbs, Woodford, Ellis and Zach Rose were the pitchers of record throughout the week.

From a personal standpoint, Ramirez said the World Series was something his son Ronnie had dreamed about since he "was a little kid." Ramirez said he remembered when Ronnie would get up and watch the Little League World Series on television and set a goal of becoming a world champion some day.

"A precious experience"

As for the runners-up, Manager Wang said he did feel pressure to get his team to repeat as champions from Chinese Taipei, saying through an interpreter, "We tried very hard in every game. We played wonderfully."

Wang said he was a little sad, "but not by much. My head is still held high."

Florida "is very strong," he added. "They have a strong pitching team and a strong hitting team. They are a very good team all the way around."

Wang said his team treasured the World Series experience, saying they made new friends off the field and learned how teams in other countries play differently on the field.

"We learned a lot," he said. "This was a very precious experience."

During closing ceremonies, managers and team spokesmen took turns saying thank you for a great week and praising the City of Taylor.

Ramirez of Tampa said the World Series was the best tournament he has seen. He thanked all of the volunteers, including the organizers, the umpires and the grounds crew, calling them a "wonderful family."

"It's unbelievable," Ramirez said in the minutes after his team won the title. "It hasn't really sunk in yet. I'm sure it will on the plane ride home."

