

BIG TRAIN BEACON



*The Official Magazine of
Bethesda Big Train Baseball*

A Sudden Adjustment

College players cope with uncertainty in the era of the coronavirus

Issue 2: July 1, 2020

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THE BIG TRAIN BEACON

Second Issue – July 1, 2020

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Get your Big Train mask!



A Message from Big Train Founder Bruce Adams

We have reestablished the Bethesda Community Base Ball Club (BCBBC) that John Ourisman and I and others incorporated in 1998 as the community nonprofit organization that built Povich Field, launched Big Train baseball, and ultimately raised \$600,000 to improve youth baseball and softball fields across the Washington region.

We have set a goal of raising \$60,000 this summer to position us to bring the fun back to Shirley Povich Field in 2021. We need your help and will value your support.

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Top Ten Thursdays

Thursday, July 2
7 p.m. ET

Game #7

The countdown continues! Watch as Alex Drain breaks down the seventh greatest game in Big Train history.

Talkin' Baseball

Monday, July 6
7 p.m. ET

Two sides of the game

Drew Strotman (Rays minor leaguer) and Dan Austin (PSI Sports Management) talk about the connection between athletes and operations staff, both in college and in the pros.

Safe at Home Tuesdays

Tuesday, July 7
7 p.m. ET

Local Summer College Baseball

Bruce Adams, Ben Trittipoe, Dean Albany and Bill Hickman talk about the history of summer collegiate baseball in the Baltimore-Washington area.

All programs stream at www.bigtrain.tv.

Becky Crowley: The Model Host Mom

By Alex Murphy

Former Bethesda Big Train star **Hunter Renfro** (2011-12) sat in the dugout at Frawley Stadium in Wilmington, Delaware the night of the 2014 Carolina/California League All-Star Game.

The night began with the jersey retirement for former Wilmington Blue Rocks player and 18-year MLB veteran Johnny Damon. As he accepted the honors, someone special stood on stage with him: his minor league host mom.

"I said, 'Hunter, I want that. After your amazing professional career, I want to be able to celebrate it on stage with you,'" **Becky Crowley** said to him after the game.

Crowley hosted Renfro for his two summers with the Big Train, along with dozens of other players over her 19 years doing so. She is a major reason why he, and many others, came back to Bethesda for a second year of summer ball.

"I knew that she was always going to be there," Renfro said. "She loves baseball and she loves her kids. She really enjoys watching us play baseball...It was kind of like a comfort blanket that she would come and you would see her in the stands."

Crowley has turned into the model Big Train host mom, but her introduction to the organization in 2001 came by surprise.

While taking care of her Uncle Jack, who was in hospice, she got a call from her sister, Nora, who began to talk about Big Train.

"She says, 'Hey, my friend told me about this college baseball summer team. They need places for players. I was gonna do it but my house is too small. Why don't you do it?'" Crowley said. "Honestly, I wasn't even half-listening to her, but I said, 'Yeah, yeah. Whatever,' and I got off the phone."

Soon after, she received calls from the families of her first two players: Chris Welsch and Brady Glass. There, her host mom journey began.

Now, she has done it year after year for nearly two decades, gaining a reputation from those that she hosted and people within Big Train.

"The host families are our secret sauce," Big Train founder **Bruce Adams** said. "The word of mouth among the players and coaches is, if you come to Bethesda, you're



Becky Crowley celebrates at Wes Rea's wedding with seven of her former Mississippi State host sons. From left to right: Zack Randolph, Cody Brown, Daryl Norris, Crowley, Rea, Hunter Renfro, Nick Vickerson and Jarrod Parks. Photo courtesy of Becky Crowley.

going to be taken care of. Becky is the personification of that. She is the Hall of Fame host mom."

Renfro is just one of many players Crowley hosted who went on to be drafted, and one of roughly a dozen consecutive Mississippi State players to stay with her for the summer.

Needless to say, she was key in getting players to return: not only Renfro, but others like former Bulldog infielder **Jarrod Parks** (Big Train 2009-10), who also stayed with her for two summers.

"Myself and Luke Adkins were really the first Mississippi State guys to begin that wave," Parks said. "I don't want to take all the credit, but the next summer I came back and played, I was basically selling Becky like, 'Yeah, everyone needs to come stay over here. She's the best.'"

The wave started with them and kept coming. Nearly every player Crowley housed who came back for a second year stayed with her again, a testament to her personality and her love for the game and her "kids."

Players aren't at Shirley Povich Field 24/7, so while at her house in Olney, Maryland, they spend a lot of time with her talking over meals and watching television.

"I tried to get her to watch basketball since the playoffs were going on," pitcher **Sean Barry** (Big Train 2016) said. "We watched Jeopardy a few nights a week. It was a good time."

Barry's older brother, Adam, played for Big Train a few years prior and also stayed with Crowley.

A native of Thousand Oaks, California, the younger Barry spent the summer on the other side of the country, but knowing Crowley through his brother helped Bethesda feel like his home away from home.

Along with hosting, Crowley has been very active within the organization, helping out as a game day volunteer early on.

"She really did it all," Big Train board member and former general manager **Alex Thompson** said. "...I interacted with her every game. This core group of adult volunteers that got really close, I could always rely on them and she was a key part of that."

She's also the treasurer of the Cal Ripken Collegiate Baseball League, a title she's held for more than five years. Big Train manager **Sal Colangelo** originally threw her name in the hat as Crowley's professional background is in accounting, and it immediately worked out.

It's a testament to the many hats she's worn in her time with Big Train, but none would have been possible without that first yes and her Uncle Jack.

"When all that was going on, it was a really sad time, but I sometimes think, 'Uncle Jack gave this to me,'" Crowley said. "...I wouldn't trade it for anything. It's just been wonderful. It's such a random, unusual thing, but it's so perfect for me."



A Sudden Adjustment:

Amid COVID-19, players make the most of an uncertain college baseball landscape

By Patrick Sanderson and Noah Ziegler

Five months ago, the 2020 college baseball season began across the nation.

For some players, it was a chance to build upon previous success; for others, a chance to earn more time on the field; and for seniors, one last collegiate show before going to the pros or out into the real world.

Meanwhile, the coronavirus pandemic had only just begun to creep its way across the United States in January and February. As the virus spread across the country and cases rose, Americans began to shut things down and prepare for the worst.

Fast forward four months later to July: global cases have surpassed ten million, North American sports are still on hold, economies are slowly reopening in phases and Shirley Povich Field sits empty and silent after the cancellation of the 2020 Cal Ripken League season.

The pandemic brought college baseball seasons to a screeching halt, cancelling regular season campaigns, conference tournaments, the College World Series and many summer ball opportunities. Players and coaches across the country have been forced to step out of the box to regroup and figure out the next steps.

While the shutdown stung, many underclassmen got to work right away, training

and preparing for next season. Seniors, meanwhile, were left pondering whether or not baseball would be part of their futures.

LONGING FOR A RETURN: Underclassmen stay engaged with game, team despite distance

Players and coaches have been thrown a pitch that nobody has seen before: coronavirus. From mounds of dirt used as tees to looking longingly at the stadium gates, they have found unconventional ways of getting a baseball fix. If anything, it has led them to return to the fundamentals, rekindling the love of the game they discovered when they were kids.

When **Chase Lee** (Big Train 2019) and his Alabama teammates returned to Tuscaloosa, following a March 10 midweek victory over UAB, he said they started to notice schools suspending all athletic events. At the time, they remained hopeful that they wouldn't be affected. But as the team prepared to welcome Missouri for its conference opener, the coaches called a meeting in the outfield to deliver the news that the entirety of the 2020 season had been canceled.

The coronavirus had robbed Lee and the Crimson Tide of a chance to continue a 16-1 start into SEC play and potentially carve a path to Omaha for the first time in more than two decades.



Without access to his college facilities, Chase Lee (Alabama) has resorted to training at a local high school. Photo courtesy of Chase Lee.

"It stung. Guys were crying, coaches were upset, everybody was just disappointed," Lee said. "We all wanted to play in the post-season, but understanding that this virus has affected a lot of people, it was probably the best decision from the leadership of the NCAA."

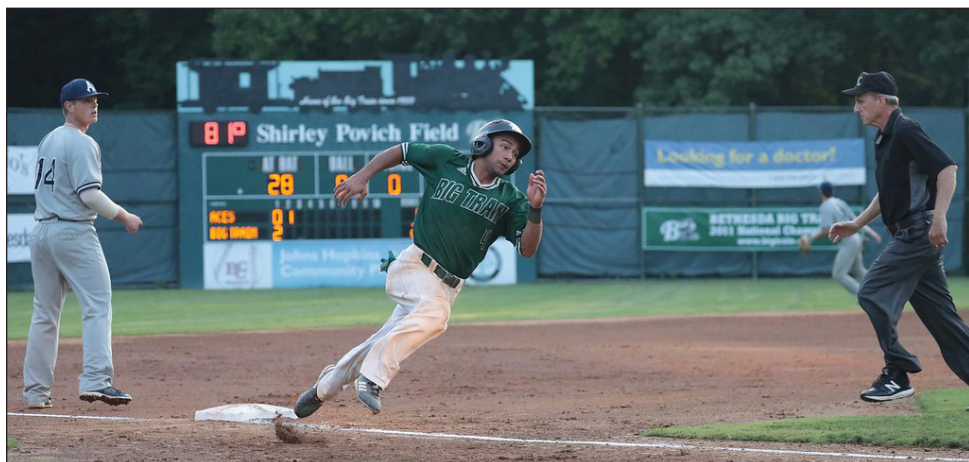
At that point, the uncertainty took complete control. Players across the country were told to go home and wait for further word, including Sacramento State infielder **Keith Torres** (Big Train 2019), who was set to return to Bethesda this summer.

Unlike Alabama, Torres' team did not shut down immediately. Players were still able to go to facilities and practice, but this too was short-lived as nationwide lockdowns began.

When Torres returned home to Waipahu, Hawaii, the state had a two-week quarantine during which everything was closed, besides essential services. This forced him to get innovative with how he was going to maintain his fitness and continue practicing. It meant making the most out of anything around his house.

From phantom swings to making adjustments to his batting stance, he did everything he could to make sure he polished all facets of his game in order to be ready to go whenever he's allowed to return to campus.

"I ended up making a tee with dirt and a ball at the top and hit that into a net," Torres said. "I know some people among my team,



Keith Torres (Sacramento State) races home last summer. After the pandemic canceled his junior season, Torres flew home to Hawaii to stay in shape while quarantining. Photo by Niamh Brennan.

A SUDDEN ADJUSTMENT



they're doing work with what they got like buckets of water, bags of sand, stuff like that."

The makeshift workout equipment is how he has powered through the pandemic. As states begin to ease restrictions, thus allowing gyms to re-open to the public, he will soon return to normal physical training along with his teammates.

Meanwhile, Lee has been able to utilize local high school facilities while adhering to the restrictions placed, such as only using the facility when the school's athletes aren't present. Previously, he was limited to his home weight set. The absence of a college-level facility furthered his desire to return to the level of normalcy that he and his teammates are accustomed to.

The emotional toll has hit hard for those who are waiting indefinitely for their next time to step up to the plate or onto the mound. The simple sight of a field or the thought of the usual camaraderie drives players like Lee and Torres to stay focused through baseball's sabbatical.

"I live about 30 miles from Tuscaloosa, so I drove down and back a couple times just to look at everything," Lee said. "I went by and just sat in the parking lot of the baseball field. I can't go in — gates are locked, doors are locked — I just sat outside the fence and looked. That sort of excitement to get all the guys there, it was a good feeling. It felt like home."

For now, they train the best they can for when the NCAA allows them to return to their respective campuses. Beyond the pandemic, they are fortunate to have remaining eligibility to continue their college careers.

The NCAA extended eligibility for players affected by the coronavirus, giving them another season to play if they chose to do so. Current rules state that athletes are allowed to play four seasons in a five-year period, unless the player receives a medical redshirt. As Lee is a rising junior and Torres a rising senior, both will be able to retain eligibility if they and their schools so choose.

Meanwhile, they remain in constant contact with teammates and coaches both from their colleges and summer ball teams. Big Train manager **Sal Colangelo** has been talking with current and former players, trying to keep an optimistic attitude for both himself and the players through a difficult period.

"I try to spin it. Where there's a negative, I'm gonna try to find a positive, and the positive [for me] is I'm able to help [my daughters],



The pandemic cut Jacob Southern's (Jacksonville) senior spring short, but NCAA's eligibility waiver allowed him to transfer to Indiana for another season. Photo courtesy of Jacob Southern.

do some things at home, spend time with my wife," Colangelo said.

The coronavirus pandemic has changed Colangelo's perspective on various things. He stresses how every player that's put on the Big Train uniform — or was supposed to — is a member of the baseball fraternity in Bethesda.

For now, Colangelo is focused on recruiting players for next summer. He has talked with college coaches and is working to bring a large portion of this summer's projected roster back for the 2021 season.

While players might be making plans for the next spring and summer, the memories to be made in summer baseball are put on hold, leaving an empty feeling for them in the present moment.

"That's probably one thing I'm going to miss the most — meeting up with the boys and creating more memories," Torres said.

FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN: Seniors ponder future after season cancellation

Torres and Lee entered this spring and the subsequent shutdown with visions of baseball in their future, no matter what.

Meanwhile, the 11 seniors from last summer's Big Train team returned to school expecting just one more spring of college ball before pursuing the sport professionally or calling it a career.

In March, pitcher **Elliot Zoellner** (Big

Train 2018-19) and his Maryland teammates had just finished a road trip to Coastal Carolina. Coronavirus cases dominated the news but remained low at the time, he said, until the numbers began to skyrocket in the following few days.

"Within the next week, we began to see the Ivy League shut down, the NBA shut down, and then things were changing all over the place," he said.

He recalls a Wednesday night contest against James Madison University — a tough home loss that preceded a flight to Texas the following morning for a weekend series against TCU. The world was constantly changing, and conferences dropping like flies was a preview to the inevitable.

Upon landing, Maryland head coach Rob Vaughn called an immediate meeting at the hotel.

"Our coach said, 'there's really no other way to say this, but the Big Ten has shut down the rest of the season,'" Zoellner said. "It took a little bit for that to set in."

That same Wednesday night, a few states south, Jacksonville catcher **Jacob Southern** (Big Train 2018-19) was preparing for a contest against Yale. They received word just hours before first pitch that the Ivy League had pulled the plug on the entire season, but, since Yale was already in Florida, they were allowed to play the game and immediately head back to Connecticut afterward. The severity of the situation around the nation hadn't yet set in.



A SUDDEN ADJUSTMENT

"None of us were really worried about our season at that point," Southern said.

At practice the next day, the team was informed that the Atlantic Sun Conference would make an announcement about the season later in the day. Originally, the conference suspended play until April 5 and teams were allowed to continue training. However, the next day during their Friday training session, he was told the whole season—and thus his college career—was cancelled.

"I sat in the locker room for about three or four hours afterwards with just a roller coaster of emotions because I'm a senior and I didn't know what was going to (happen now)," Southern said. "The practice ended at about three and I don't think I left the locker room until 7:30 or 8 p.m."

This was before any seniors had any clarity on the prospect of extra eligibility, so as far as they knew, it was over.

Zoellner, fresh off a stellar 2019 in Bethesda, was off to the best start of his collegiate career this spring, striking out 16 over 11 scoreless innings out of the bullpen. After a slow February, Southern was heating up too, hitting safely in 10 of his last 11 games before the cancellation.

Of course, they both knew their team's and community's health and safety were of the utmost importance, but this wasn't how it was supposed to end. It seemed unfair. One last ride with brothers, one last run at hardware, all to be capped off by a final sendoff in front of fans, friends and family was gone, all in one moment.

"I had already accepted the fact that [the 2020 season] might be my last 56 games, and I was okay with it. Then the season ended after 18 games," Southern said. "I wouldn't say I wasn't okay with it, but I was struggling to be alright with it right away."

"It wasn't sitting right," he continued.

As schools began transitioning to online lessons for the rest of the year and students moved back home, the near future, very simply, didn't look promising for these two and their fellow seniors.

Then, they each got a lifeline. In late March, the NCAA Division I council granted seniors an extra season of eligibility, giving them another shot at a final collegiate run.

Zoellner will return to Maryland for another season in 2021. Southern decided to transfer to Indiana University, where he will play his final season as a graduate student.



After a terrific senior spring was cut short by the NCAA shutdown, Elliot Zoellner (Maryland) will return to College Park in 2021 for a fifth season.
Photo courtesy of Maryland Athletics.

With his future more certain, Zoellner is grateful for the opportunities he and many others have as the shutdown continues.

"The whole silver lining in this situation is that a lot of people are now able to spend more time with their families," he said.

Now with their paths secure, Zoellner and Southern join the likes of Lee and Torres, using the time off to prep for another season on the college diamond.

Come 2021, they'll be beyond ready to get on the field and take care of unfinished business.

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Povich and Johnson: two D.C. legends

Maury Povich and George Solomon discuss sportswriter **Shirley Povich's** career, quest for equality in sports

By **Patrick Sanderson**

In episode two of Safe at Home Tuesdays, Big Train founder **Bruce Adams** interviewed television personality **Maury Povich** and former *Washington Post* sports editor **George Solomon** about the life of long time *Washington Post* sports editor and Baseball Hall of Famer **Shirley Povich**.

A native of Bar Harbor, Maine, a young Shirley Povich began his career as a golf caddie in the small coastal town. Later, he moved down to Washington D.C., where he quickly became a sportswriter for the *Post*. He served as the paper's sports editor for more than 40 years, and after his "retirement" in 1973, he continued to write regular columns until his death in 1998.

He covered everything from the Washington Senators 1924 World Series victory to Cal Ripken, Jr. He was around for Lou Gehrig's famous farewell address and covered the great Jim Brown. For many years Shirley Povich worked alongside Solomon, who served as his sports editor during his final years at the *Post*.

Maury Povich recalled the way his father wrote and spoke out against racial injustice, not just on the field, but in the newsroom.

"It was such an easy call for him because if you're looking for the greatest people in various sports and all of a sudden because of the color of your skin you're denied, you're denied the opportunity to show yourself, to show your worth," Maury Povich said. "I mean, how can you allow that to happen?"

Shirley Povich's famously wrote about "integrating" the goal lines of football, in an effort to break down racial barriers in the sport.



Maury and David Povich with their mother, Ethel, at the first-ever game at Shirley Povich Field in 1999.



Left to right: Joe DiMaggio, Shirley Povich and Yogi Berra.

He discussed working with women and people of color. Solomon cited him as a pioneer of integrating minorities into sports journalism.

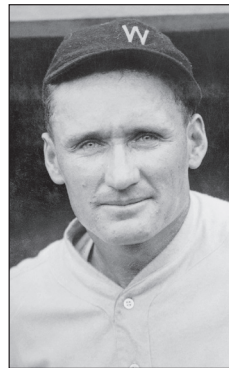
Bethesda Big Train's home ballpark, Shirley Povich Field, was named in his honor in 1998.

This episode originally aired on Tuesday, June 16. To rewatch it, visit bigtrain.tv and click "View Full Archives."

Hank Thomas and Tim Kurkjian examine the career and legacy of Hall of Fame pitcher **Walter Johnson**

By **Patrick Sanderson**

In episode three of Safe at Home Tuesdays, Big Train founder **Bruce Adams** discussed Hall of Fame pitcher **Walter Johnson** with ESPN's **Tim Kurkjian** and **Hank Thomas**, Johnson's grandson.



Walter Johnson.

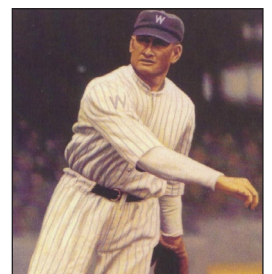
Johnson played his entire 21-year major league career for the Washington Senators, winning his lone World Series title in 1924 in a thrilling seven-game series against the New York Giants. He took the mound late in game seven for a four-inning relief effort before a walk-off sealed the Washington's first and only championship until 2019.

Johnson announced before the 1924 season that he planned to retire at the end of the year. The Senators had been subpar in years prior, and without any major roster changes, nobody expected them to make it to the 1924 World Series. However, they ended up edging out two great teams, the Yankees and Tigers, in the pennant race before winning the World Series.

"Walter was going to leave baseball without being in (a World Series). Well, guess what? Fate had something different in mind," Thomas said.

Johnson had one-of-a-kind pitching mechanics, the likes of which most hitters of that era had never seen. His wicked sidearm delivery kept hitters, especially right-handed ones, off-balance, Kurkjian said.

"Walter didn't even throw the ball until he was thirteen, I think he just had the gift. He also was bigger than everyone else which is a really, really big help with the whip action he's got and strong arm action, and I'm sure they hadn't seen much like that," Kurkjian added. "The windup itself, and the arm action is just ridiculous, add that to the size."



Walter Johnson follows through on his famous sidearm delivery.

Kurkjian, who has covered numerous Hall of Fame pitchers across his 40-year career, said he is "certain that Walter Johnson is the greatest pitcher of all time."

Today, Johnson's legacy is seen all around the D.C. area: on a Bethesda high school (which Kurkjian attended), in the Nationals Park ring of honor and of course, the Bethesda Big Train, which takes its name from Johnson's nickname.

This episode originally aired on Tuesday, June 23. To rewatch it, visit bigtrain.tv and click "View Full Archives."



TOP TEN THURSDAYS

#9: July 30, 2004 – Big Train 4, Braves 3

By Erin Byard

The Herndon Braves met the Big Train at Shirley Povich Field for this late July game. With only two games left in the regular season, the teams were tied atop the Clark Griffith League.

Winning the regular season title would be huge for Bethesda, as then-assistant coach **Sal Colangelo** put it: “We had come so close every year ... we just felt this was our year.”

Big Train starter **Casey Baron** (Maryland) surrendered three runs early.

After plating one in the fourth, Bethesda brought the score to 3-2 in the bottom of the fifth when **Jonnie Knoble** (San Francisco) stepped up, as he had many times before for this team, doubling and then coming around to score.

“The one thing in common from these important games in the era when we played is that Jonnie’s in the middle of it somewhere, either on defense, baserunning or offensively,” teammate **Greg Lemon** (Salisbury) noted.



The 2004 Big Train team.

Big Train manager **Derek Hacopian** then called on **Russell Durfee** (Duke) to relieve Baron, in an attempt to get the Herndon offense “off-balance”. This strategy proved effective as he allowed only one hit, three walks and no runs over 3 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings.

Still down 3-2, their moment to take the lead finally came in the bottom of the seventh inning. With one out, **Andrew Smith** (San Francisco) singled, stole second and advanced to third on out. With two outs, he sped home on a wild pitch to tie the game.

The Braves turned to their lethal left-hander, Dustin Pease. However, he was no match for Big Train designated hitter

Justin Martin (Florida Atlantic), who doubled off the right field fence, plating **Trey Cuevas** (Southern Mississippi) to put the Big Train up 4-3.

David Hayes (Florida Atlantic) took over in the eighth to secure the win, with an assist from Knoble in center field. Knoble caught a deep fly and took a shot at the Braves’ runner tagging from second. His throw bounced perfectly to Smith at third, to end the inning and squash the threat.

Hayes sealed the win for the Big Train in the bottom of the ninth, retiring Herndon in order to close the game.

The Big Train moved one game up in the standings with only two games remaining in regular season play, and ultimately finished first, claiming their first regular season title.

They topped it off by capturing their first postseason league championship in team history, in what would be their final season in the Clark Griffith League.

It was a “breakout season” for Big Train, Colangelo noted, as it established them as a standout team in the nation.

#8: July 10, 2009 – Big Train 4, Orioles 3

By Erin Byard

The Big Train hosted Youse’s Maryland Orioles to a packed house for this battle between the top two Ripken League teams.

The two teams had developed an ongoing rivalry: Bethesda took the Ripken League regular season title in 2005 and 2006 and the Orioles took it in 2007 and 2008. Their competition continued in 2009, with Big Train only two games ahead of the Orioles on July 10.

The Orioles took flight early, going up 2-0 in the top of the first against Big Train starter **Seth Hester** (Southern Mississippi). Big Train responded quickly in the bottom of the inning to bring the score to 2-1, when **Eli Boike** (Michigan State) singled and then scored on an Oriole error.

After a solo homerun in the third extended the Orioles’ lead, **Jarrod Parks** (Mississippi State) drove in Boike on a single to cut the deficit to 3-2. Parks came through again in the sixth inning, this time in the field, when he made the defensive play of the

game, and possibly of the year, diving into left field with full extension to make a catch just inches off the ground.

“I had to get every bit of distance I could to make it to this ball,” noted Parks. The play energized the team and set the stage for a late rally.

The Big Train finally evened the score in the bottom of the seventh on an double by **Danny Stienstra** (San Jose State) which scored Boike once again, in fitting fashion. **Nolan Rudman** (Ventura College) entered in the eighth to take over for Hester and went on to pitch four no-hit innings.

With neither team’s pitchers caving, the game went to extra innings.

Bethesda started the 11th inning with a **Connor Bernatz** (San Francisco) single. He advanced to second on a wild throw, and then to third on a sacrifice bunt. After two intentional walks, **Luke Adkins** (Mississippi State), the leading hitter in the Ripken League at the time, found himself up to bat with one out and bases loaded. He drove the ball over the right fielder, and the crowd



Luke Adkins drove in the winning run in the 11th inning. Photo by Lisa Kammerman.

went wild as Bernatz crossed home with the winning run.

The 4-3 victory moved the Big Train three games clear of the Orioles, and they went on to win the regular season title. The team carried this momentum into the postseason, as they captured their first-ever outright Ripken League postseason championship.

“2009 was the most memorable summer of my life. That team was so fun, and we were so close, such a tight knit bunch... We played with so much enthusiasm,” Parks said.

Tune in to bigtrain.tv this Thursday, July 2, as we highlight Game #7.