



Inside The Nation

Baseball/Softball News at Diamond Nation

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MEMORIAL DAY BLAST FEATURES 70 TEAMS IN SIX AGE BRACKETS



By Bob Behre

The Memorial Day Blast tournament will take off on Friday afternoon at Diamond Nation and keep a tight hold on the Flemington, N.J. facility through a busy Monday dominated by playoff games.

The 70-team event will boast six age group brackets -- 10U, 11U, 12U, 13U, 14U and 15U. The 11U and 12U fields begin play Friday afternoon and the other four age brackets pick it up on Saturday morning.

The **10U Memorial Day Blast** begins with an 8 a.m. opener on Saturday when the Diamond Jacks 10U squad faces Trumbull Travel Gold on Field 5A. After two days of pool play the 10U tournament begins its playoffs with a game pitting the No. 2 and No. 3 playoff seeds at 3:15 p.m. on Monday. The 10U championship game follows at 5:30 p.m. on Field 2.

Baserats Baseball, North Colonie Bison Blue and the South Shore Seadogs bolster a strong 10U field.

The **11U Memorial Day Blast** begins with an intriguing pair of openers at 4:30 p.m. on Friday. Top Lumber plays the Diamond Jacks Super 11U squad and the Mercer Aces take on the Diamond Jacks Gold 11U. The 11U playoffs get underway with the semifinals at 9 a.m. on Monday followed by the championship game at 1 p.m. on Field 2.

The 11U field is fortified by Bulldogs Baseball Academy, RCBC Nationals and the Pennsbury Falcons 11U.

The **12U Memorial Day Blast** is the second talented field of teams to begin play at 4:30 p.m. on Friday when Eagle Baseball Club plays the Diamond Jacks Super 12U and the CB Raiders face the Diamond Jacks Gold 12U in a pair of openers. The 12U playoffs begin with the semifinals at 11 a.m. on Monday on Fields 2 and 6. The championship game follows at 1:15 p.m. on Field 6.

That strong quartet of teams opening the 12U tournament are complemented by an equally strong group of teams steered by the Burlington Falcons, Elite Squad NY, Ridgefield Travel Baseball, two Trumbull Travel teams and Tri-State Arsenal NY 12U National.

The **13U Memorial Day Blast** kicks off play at 8 a.m. on Saturday when the Morris County Cubs tangle with Trumbull Travel at Jack Cust Baseball Academy. The 13U playoffs begin with the semifinals at 3:15 p.m. on Monday before the championship game will be contested at 5:30 p.m. on Field 1.

Jersey Boyz Baseball, the Diamond Jacks Super 13U, Rising Stars Gold and All-Stars Academy Prime 13U round out an impressive 13U field.

The **14U Memorial Day Blast** begins with a pair of openers at 8 a.m. on Saturday that boast games pitting Jersey Boyz Baseball and Baseball Warehouse 2023 Black and All-Stars Academy Select 14U and the Diamond Jacks Gold 14U. The 14U playoffs start at 1:15 p.m. on Monday with the semifinals, before the championship game closes the tournament at 3:15 p.m. on Field 4.

Contributing to a talented array of teams in the 14U tournament field are Prospects Baseball Academy, SKD Aces Black, Marucci Philadelphia, the Diamond Jacks Super 14U and Mid-Maryland United.

The **15U Memorial Day Blast** begins play at 8 a.m. on Saturday when BBA Elite squares off with West End Voltage. The 15U tournament playoffs get underway at 9 a.m. on Monday with a pair of semifinals. The championship game is set for 1:15 p.m. on Field 1.

A's Prospects 2022 National and SKD Aces help form a small but sturdy field.

DIAMOND NATION ENSHRINED IN HUNTERDON COUNTY BUSINESS HALL OF FAME

By Bob Behre

Diamond Nation spends much of its day-to-day operation instructing young players and helping to develop their skills to the point where they can play at a high level, be it in high school, college or even professional. Several former Diamond Jacks or NJ Super 17 players are playing Major League baseball today.

It would be spectacular for our instructors and coaches to witness one of our own one day make it to the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame. But, for now, Diamond Nation will have to settle for an honor of its own. Two weeks ago, Diamond Nation was inducted into the Hunterdon County Business Hall of Fame.

Diamond Nation and Healthquest Fitness Center were inducted together under the category of "Contemporary Award." The award goes to a company established less than 100 years ago, that brings economic growth, prosperity and innovation to Hunterdon County, is currently operating in the county and is a commercial, for profit business.

Coincidentally, Diamond Nation is celebrating its 10th Anniversary and the business has not only shown consistent growth but it has generated significant economic activity throughout Hunterdon County and beyond.

"We have experienced tremendous growth over the last 10 years," says Diamond Nation's general manager Nick Massari. "We now employ more than 250 people on a yearly basis. While many of these are seasonal employees, we have expanded our administrative staff as well."

Indeed, the story of Diamond Nation cannot be told without the back story. That backstory is the inception of Jack Cust Baseball Academy and what was truly a dream of the Cust family to turn athletes in the northeast into viable competitors with their southern and western counterparts.

The Custs built Jack Cust Baseball Academy in December 1997 to provide indoor instruction and training during the cold winter months. This was no half-hearted operation and it was one with a very serious plan for the present and a vision for the future. The academy immediately implemented the Jack Cust Hitting School and Hitting Philosophy.

Less than three years later, in June of 2000, a turf field was constructed next to JCBA. Every improvement or addition to their baseball academy seemed to ignite more ingenuity in the Custs.

By December of 2003, a 130,000 square foot sports dome -- to become known as the



Jack Cust, far right, receives Hall of Fame plaque from State Senator Kip Bateman (far left) and Bobby Benjamin of Flemington Furs.

Healthquest Sports Dome -- rose above Flemington on the north side of Route 31. Jack Cust Baseball Academy and its accompanying sports dome quickly became a go-to training site for serious ball players aged 10-18 in the cold, unforgiving months of November-through-March.

Winter leagues sprouted at the Dome and the level and depth of instruction and training naturally exploded as players had the freedom to hit, field, throw and run to their hearts' desire.

The spring and summer months at JCBA's new turf field had already seen a steady flow of baseball talent, but there was a problem. One field wasn't going to come close to meeting the needs of the flow of players and teams that wanted in.

Jack, Sr., who played at Seton Hall University, and Jack, Jr., drafted in the first round out of Immaculata High School in 1997 by the Arizona Diamondbacks, didn't have to look far in their desire to expand. A short walk from JCBA and on the corner of Bartles Corner

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and River Road stood a parcel of land that seemed to be begging for baseball and softball.

The Custo's didn't look at the 35-acre parcel as an opportunity for modest expansion of JCBA. They sensed a real opportunity to create something that was unique, the very first in New Jersey and, indeed, the northeast. By the summer of 2009, Diamond Nation rose from a pasture in rural Hunterdon County. And with it came earth-shaking change to the sport of travel baseball and softball in the northeast.

TWELVE-INNING SOMERSET COUNTY FINAL ONE FOR THE BOOKS

By Bob Behre

When Cooper Bobowicz singled home courtesy runner Tommy Ramazzotto with two outs in the top of the seventh inning to knot Ridge in a 5-5 tie with Immaculata, no one could imagine where this 46th edition of the Somerset County Tournament championship game was headed.

The righthanded Bobowicz, Ridge's ace, had been knocked out of the game in the fifth inning, leaving his team in a 5-2 hole to the defending champion Spartans. His contribution at the plate, however, changed the course of the game and would indirectly create opportunities for new heroes to emerge.

Before it was all said and done, Immaculata's reliever Ryan Kabus would shut down Ridge over more than seven eventful relief innings and deliver a two-out walk-off single in the bottom of the 12th inning to score Justin Pinckert with the winning run in a wild 6-5 Immaculata victory. The clutch hit also ended a 4-hour and 10-minute marathon.

Before we dissect the particulars in this epic contest, here's some basics. The victory gave second-seeded Immaculata (12-8) its second straight SCT championship and 14th overall. Fifth-seeded Ridge (15-9) was seeking its seventh SCT crown and first since 2011.

Kabus relieved Dan Johnson in the fifth after Greg Bozzo and Jayden Hylton singled with two outs. Johnson had been difficult on the Ridge batters and gritty to that point but his pitch count had inched up to 86 pitches. Immaculata coach Kevin Cust admitted the decision to lift Johnson at that point, "wasn't an easy one."

"I felt good the first four innings," said Johnson. "Then I started losing control."

Kabus went 3-2 on his first batter, Jack Love, before the Ridge right fielder and No. 2 pitcher laced a double into right-center field to score both runners and draw Ridge to within 5-4. Kabus got out of further trouble in the inning and would allow only the run in the seventh the rest of the way.

Kabus would, in fact, permit one run on seven hits, strike out eight, walked one and hit a batter in a 106-pitch effort that saw him strand 11 Ridge runners. He battled with at least one runner on base in every inning.

"I felt like Ryan got better as he went along," said Cust. "It was a tough situation for him, a tough matchup with their hitters. I have to give Ridge credit. They kept the pressure on. But Ryan kept getting us back in the dugout."

Love relieved Bobowicz with one out in the fifth and was even better than Kabus for 7.2 innings. He permitted one run on five hits, struck out four and walked two, one of which was intentional. Three of those hits came in the 12th. Love was the presumptive starter in Ridge's NJSIAA North Jersey, Section 2 opener on Monday before he was forced into a relieve role in which he threw 94 pitches.

Pinckert opened the bottom of the 12th for Immaculata by hitting a bouncer to the left side that shortstop Jason Arrigo snared in the hole. Pinckert, however, beat it out for an infield single. Peter Gallo followed with a liner to center field for the first out. Catcher Mike McGee, 0-for-5 to that point, singled to right field to chase Pinckert to third.

Johnson, who had delivered a momentum changing three-run triple in the fourth, was intentionally walked. Love then struck out Alex Antigua on a 2-2 fastball for

The 35-acre layout boasted six artificial turf playing fields -- four large fields and two Little League-sized fields -- 12 indoor and outdoor batting cages and 28 bullpens. The main building at the entrance to the complex included a retail shop and reception area. In the middle of the complex stood a large structure called the Scout Tower, where scouts could view four fields from a second floor vantage point.

Those facilities are thriving today as nearly 3,000 teams utilize Diamond Nation annually, filling local hotels, eateries and shopping venues with customers year 'round.



Immaculata celebrates its 14th Somerset County Tournament championship.

the second out. Up stepped Kabus, the spunky shortstop who had already capped the four-run fourth inning with an RBI single and pitched with guile and guts for 7.1 innings.

"I was trying to look for a fastball," said Kabus, who four-hit Bridgewater-Raritan in the semifinals. "A lot of times in games like this you just go on adrenaline."

That adrenaline helped Kabus to hit a soft liner to right field on an 1-0 pitch from Love, just out of the reach of leaping second baseman Chris Parker, as Pinckert raced across the plate with the winning run. Kabus was mobbed at first base by his jubilant teammates.

"I wasn't sure where the ball went at first," said Kabus, "then saw him run back for it and the ball fall."

Kabus was a large hero in this one but just one of several players who put forth incredible performances in this 12-inning grinder.

In fact, had Kabus gotten that last out of the seventh, Johnson would have had the win and surely the headline having delivered that huge hit in the fourth. Johnson had been in the lineup just three times this season and had implored Cust to be inserted to get some swings on Friday night.

"I've had a back injury this season and have been held out, but I've felt better and I begged coach to let me hit tonight," said Johnson, a recent Scranton University commit.

Johnson came up with the bases loaded and one out in the fourth and his team trailing

2-0. Derek Von Horn had started the rally with a leadoff single before Pinckert leaned into a curveball and was hit by the pitch. Gallo followed with a bunt that he popped up to the left side. Bobowicz broke from the mound but slipped as the ball fell beyond him for an infield single.

Johnson got a high and tight fastball on the first pitch from Bobowicz and fought it off, lining it just inside the right field foul line. The ball rolled to the wall as Johnson raced to third and all three runners scored to give Immaculata a sudden 3-2 lead.

"Dan begged me to put him in the lineup," said Cust. "He had a good BP at Branchburg Sports Complex before the game. It was his turn to hit. I know he's wanted to hit all season. He's had that pulled muscle in his back. He's a tough kid."

The most recent extra inning game in an SCT final came in 2007 when Immaculata defeated Hillsborough, 12-11, in an epic 10-inning battle, but the 2019 game will go down as the longest of the long in SCT history.

NOTES: Ridge catcher Greg Bozzo was 3-for-6 and his courtesy runner scored three runs. It was Bozzo who led off the seventh with a single that eventually led to Bobowicz's game-tying single later in the inning. ... Freshman first baseman Jayden Hylton shined, too, for Ridge. Hylton went 3-for-6 and scored a run.

... Parker reached on infield single in the top of the first inning and scored from third later in the inning when Johnson balked. Ridge's lead was boosted to 2-0 in the fourth when Johnson intentionally walked Arrigo to lead the bases with two outs then plunked No. 9 hitter Lukas Goodman to force home the run.

... Every Immaculata batter had six at bats in the 12-inning game. Ridge's first three hitters batted seven times. ... Ryan Giacobello and Von Horn had two hits apiece for Immaculata.