

Inside The Nation

Baseball/Softball News at Diamond Nation

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FLEMINGTON, NEW JERSEY

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HOME RUN CLASSIC MARKS RETURN OF 17s TO 'THE NATION'

By Bob Behre

The Home Run Classic, powered by Victus Bats, marks the first tournament of the spring with high school upperclassmen taking their hacks.

Sure, there will be separate tournament fields for 10U, 11U and 15U teams this weekend but the 17-18U Wood Bat Home Run Classic triggers the first thoughts of summer ball at the region's finest baseball facility.

As the NJSIAA tournament winds down to the sectional championship games on Friday and the state group tournament next week, Diamond Nation is host to a sturdy field of 17-18U squads today (Friday)-through-Sunday.

The Morris County Cubs square off with All-Out Baseball and Untamed Prospects face Top Lumber 16-18U in a pair of entertaining 17-18U Wood Bat openers at 6:30 p.m. on Friday.

The **17-18U Wood Bat Home Run Classic** playoff kicks off at 2:15 p.m. on Sunday when the Nos. 2 and 3 seeds battle for a berth in the championship game. The winner will oppose the No. 1 seed for the title at 4:30 p.m. on Field 3.

Baseball U. NY, Hit 'N Run Outlaws, The Sports Yard, Untamed Recruits and Dig In baseball help form a deep 17-18U field.

The **15U Home Run Classic** field also begins play at 6:30 p.m. on Friday when Tri-Township and Locked In Expos and Jersey Boyz Baseball and Elite Fleet 15U tangle in a pair of openers.

The 36-team 15U Home Run Classic field is split into Red and White brackets for the playoffs, which begin at 4:30 p.m. on Sunday. The highly competitive 15U field is whittled down to the two championship games at 8:30 p.m. The White final will be played on Field 1 while the Red final will be contested on Field 4.

The imposing 15U tournament field also boasts Barnegat Braves Scout, the Patterson Pirates, the South River Seahawks 2022, Taconic Rangers and Warstic Citius.

The 11U and 10U Home Run Classic fields don't take the field until Saturday morning.



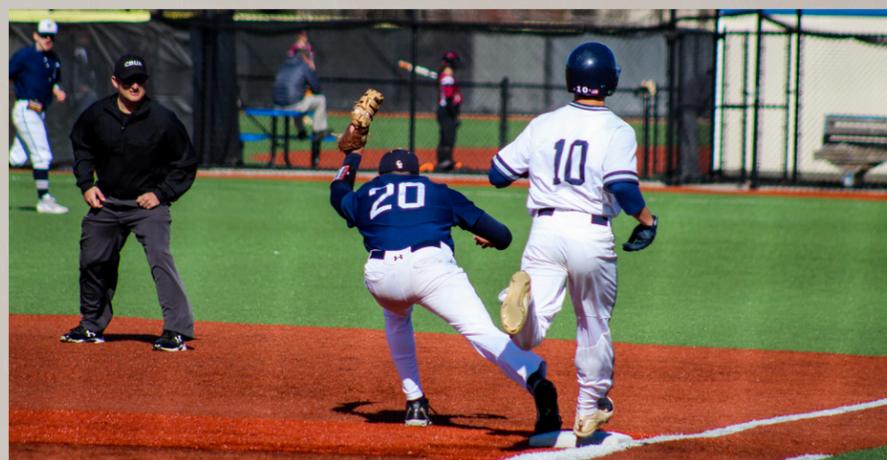
The **11U Home Run Classic** begins at 8 a.m. on Saturday with an opener pitting the Diamond Jacks Gold 11U and the Columbia Clippers. The 11U tournament playoffs open at 4:30 p.m. on Sunday when the Nos. 2 and 3 seeds play for a berth in the championship game. The winner takes on the No. 1 seed for the title at 6:30 p.m. on Field 2.

The Diamond Jacks Super 11U, Warriors Baseball NY, Flood City Elite and NJ Axemen are a few more of the talented teams in the impressive 11U field.

The **10U Home Run Classic** bracket throws its first pitch at 8 a.m. on Saturday when the Marlton Reds face the Diamond Jacks 10U in a well-matched opener.

The four-team 10U tournament playoff opens with individual semifinal games at 2:15 p.m. and 4:30 p.m. on Sunday. The 10U championship game is set for 6:30 p.m. on Sunday on Field 6.

Tri-State Arsenal National and NHYB Red Elite help round out a potent 10U field.



APSEL PITCHES NORTH HUNTERDON TO THIRD STRAIGHT SECTIONAL TITLE



By Bob Behre

Junior righty Julia Apsel pitched a two-hitter and struck out 14 Columbia batters to steer North Hunterdon to an 8-1 victory and its third straight NJSIAA North Jersey, Section 2, Group 4 championship on Tuesday at Diamond Nation.

North Hunterdon, the defending Group 4 champion, plays the winner of Wednesday's Section 1 final, pitting Bergen Tech at Mount Olive, in a Group 4 semifinal at 2 p.m. on Thursday at Caldwell University. The Group 4 championship game is Sunday at Kean University in Union.

Second-seeded North Hunterdon (17-6) broke the game open with a five-run second inning then simply let Apsel go to work. Apsel retired 15 of 16 batters after permitting Columbia's first two batters of the game to reach base.

"My backdoor curveball and screwball were good today," said Apsel, "and I had a few good changeups." Apsel permitted just one run and it was unearned while walking four.

"I'm happy for Julia," said North Hunterdon coach Anthony Rotondo. "She waited her turn behind Maggie Swan the past two seasons. When I gave her the ball for the seventh inning I told her, 'this is your year. Go finish it.'"

Swan, who just completed her freshman year at NYU, was on hand for the game with a few of her 2018 North Hunterdon teammates, loudly cheering their former teammates on. "It's a lot different for me this year," said Apsel. "I'm just trying to do my best and fill Maggie's shoes."

Columbia (16-12), the No. 5 seed, had stunned top-seeded Westfield in the semifinals in come-from-behind fashion. The South Orange school overcame a 2-0 deficit to defeat the Blue

Devils, 5-2. But Columbia's righty Sydney Waldon, usually effectively wild in the zone, issued six walks in the second inning and threw five wild pitches as the Lions scored five runs with the benefit of a single hit.

Waldon, however, was tough when in the zone as North Hunterdon managed just six hits. But Waldon hurt herself with nine walks and hit two batters.

"We saw her Friday against Westfield," said Rotondo. "She was tough to hit and effectively wild. Our plan was to be aggressively patient. Not necessarily taking the first pitch but looking for something to drive."

Maria Newsome and Eliza Filus drew bases-loaded walks in the second, Chloe Poceschi singled in a run and two more runs scored on wild pitches. Cate Sand singled in the third inning, stole second, reached third on a fly ball and scored on a wild pitch to boost the lead to 6-0. Taylor Hucke doubled hard down the left field line leading off the fifth for North Hunterdon and came around on a pair of wild pitches as the lead ballooned to 7-0.

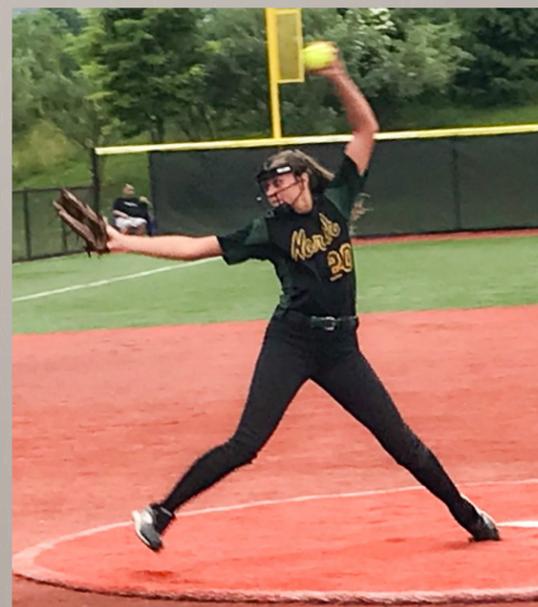
The Cougars finally got on the board in the top of the sixth when Hudson Hassler singled through the left side with one out, stole second and scored as Apsel threw errantly to first base on Claire Salinardo's bunt. Hassler, who led off the game with a single through the middle, had both hits for Columbia.

Filus tripled to left-center leading off the bottom of the sixth and scored on Poceschi's single to right to extend the lead to 8-1. Poceschi went 3-for-4 with two RBI in the game.

Filus, a junior, broke her left ankle on April 4 and just returned to the No. 3 spot in the North Hunterdon lineup about 10 days ago. She went 2-for-3 with a walk and scored a run. Her booming triple in the sixth perhaps signaling the Lions' best hitter is back.

"I don't think I've hit anything since I'm back like I did in my last at bat," said Filus. "I feel good. It's a little sore after games but I'm getting better."

Filus kept her focused during her long injury hiatus by keeping score of games on the team's Game Changer program.



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NORTH HUNTERDON (continued from front page)

"It was tough not be able to do anything," she said. "I watched the team come together during that time."

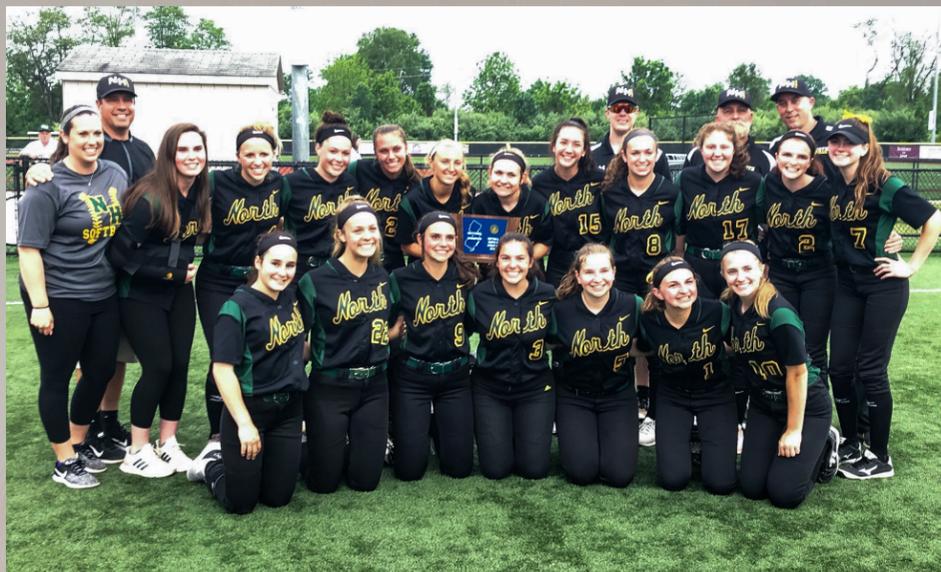
Rotondo certainly is thrilled to get Filus back for the stretch run as the Lions bid for another Group 4 championship.

"Eliza was devastated when she hurt the ankle," said Rotondo. "We had to stay in her ear. We wanted her to believe she could make it back just like we believed it. Now the ankle is just a memory."

North Hunterdon also had to survive an injury to Amanda Brogan, who battled with a back injury but has returned to fortify the Lions' lineup.

NOTES: Columbia center fielder Cara Harrington made outstanding plays on consecutive North Hunterdon batters in the third inning. There were no outs and runners on the corners when Jensen Macaulay ripped a liner to center. Harrington charged in, snared the liner and fired home to easily get the tagging Hucke for a double play. Megan Hanily then hit a sinking liner to center that Harrington grabbed at her shoe tops for the third out.

... Hucke reached base all four trips to the plate. She walked twice, doubled and was hit by a pitch. ... North Hunterdon stole five bases.



PIZZA WALK-OFF SINGLE DELIVERS FOR BASERATS BASEBALL



By Bob Behre

Matt Pizza had to grind through the first hot weather tournament of the spring behind the plate for Baserats Baseball's 10U squad but had enough left in his tank to deliver at the biggest moment of the championship game.

Pizza lined a hard single into the left-center field gap with one out in the bottom of the sixth inning to score Vincent Petruzzelli with the winning run as Baserats Baseball edged the Diamond Jacks 10U, 5-4, in a wildly entertaining Memorial Day Blast 10U championship game.

Pizza was named the 10U Memorial Day Blast Most Valuable Player.

"Matt is such a good player," said Baserats coach James Speciale. "He caught the majority of the games in the tournament. When he came up in that spot I just felt he was going to come through."

Petruzzelli had triggered the rally with a lead off double into the left-center field gap and scored easily on Pizza's shot. It was apropos that Petruzzelli's double finally found a spot where the Diamond Jacks' center fielder Jake Masterson couldn't reach. Masterson had robbed Petruzzelli of extra-base hits in the first and third innings, chasing down long fly balls deep in the right-center and left-center field gaps, respectively.

"Vincent is our four-hitter and has been hitting well all season for us," said Speciale. "He hit his first homer over the fence (Sunday). He's a great worker."

In fact, the Diamond Jacks outfield had put on quite a show in keeping their team in the game. Right fielder Tommy Denvir made a remarkable running catch near the fence on a Jake Levine shot with a runner on first base and none out in the fifth. The catch helped the Diamond Jacks keep the deficit to one run.

Tommy Riche singled home Jackson Lewis to tie the game at 4-4 with one out in the top of the sixth for the Diamond Jacks. Lewis had led off with an infield single and moved to second on a fielder's choice grounder to first base. Riche stole second after his single and raced toward the plate when Reid Bazydlo's grounder bled through the left side of the infield. But left fielder Lucas Schettino fired to the plate to just nip Riche for the third out of the inning.

It was a 10U championship game that was played at an unusually high level, including plenty of big plays and clutch hits.

The Baserats (5-0) struck for a run in the first inning and three runs in the second to build an early 4-0 lead. Joseph Raimonda singled with one out in the bottom of the first and came around on a couple Diamond Jacks miscues. Kevin Rugg singled home a run, Schettino drew a bases-loaded walk and Levine had a fielder's choice grounder to score the third run of the second inning.

The Diamond Jacks answered with two runs in the third when Masterson drew a walk and later scored on a passed ball and Anthony Caruso's sac fly to center scored Kevin Stevenson.

The game was in the hands of both teams' bullpens early on and both units performed in outstanding fashion.

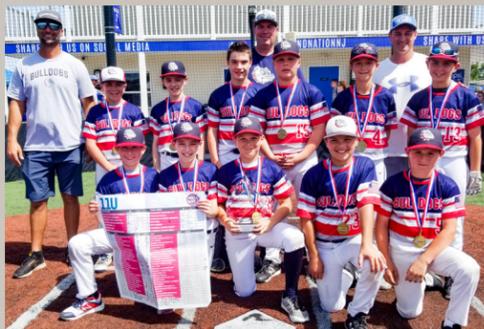
Lewis and Riche combined to limit the Baserats to one run on three hits over the final 4.1 innings while striking out four and walking one. Levine extricated the Baserats from a bases-loaded, one-out jam in the third and would permit just two runs on four hits over the final four innings, striking out four and walking none.

"Jake did a great job closing," said Speciale. "He hit his spots and kept them off stride."

But the Diamond Jacks did peck away to draw within 4-3 in the fifth. Michael Basile led off by hitting a laser into the right-center field gap for a triple and, after Masterson's infield single, came home on the back end of a double-steal attempt. Masterson was rung up at second base by Pizza on the play.

In the end, it was a game that saw two excellent 10U teams putting on quite a show on a warm Memorial Day afternoon. "They're a solid team," said Speciale of the Diamond Jacks 10U, "a great team that is well-coached. Their outfield made some incredible plays."

The Baserats outscored their tournament opponents 48-9. The Diamond Jacks 10U held a 58-13 runs advantage on their opponents.



Memorial Day Blast recaps

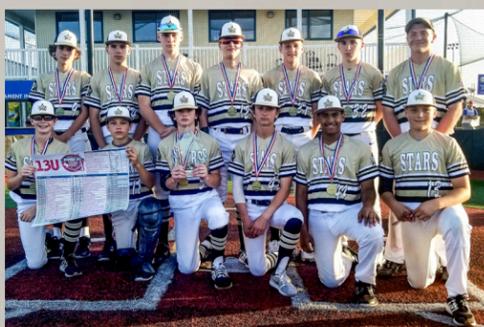
11U

Bulldogs Baseball Academy 12, SKD Aces, 0
Bulldogs Baseball Academy defeated SKD Aces, 12-0, in the 11U Memorial Day Blast championship game. Jake Clayton of the Bulldogs was named the 11U tournament's Most Valuable Player. Bulldogs Baseball Academy (6-0) outscored its opponents 69-14. SKD Aces (5-1) held a 30-23 runs advantage on their opponents.



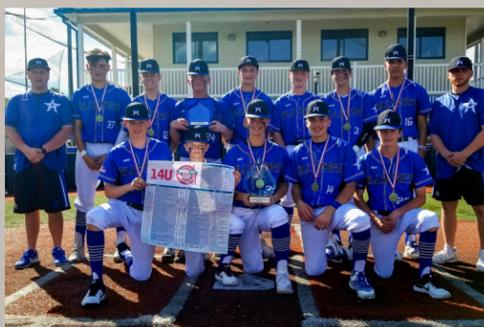
12U

Diamond Jacks Super 12U 17, CB Raiders, 0
The Diamond Jacks Super 12U defeated the CB Raiders, 17-0, in the 12U Memorial Day Blast championship game. Brevin Bezick of the Diamond Jacks was named the 12U tournament's Most Valuable Player. The Diamond Jacks (6-0) outscored their opponents 71-8 while the Raiders (4-2) held a 47-35 runs advantage on their opponents.



13U

Rising Stars Gold 13U 14, All Stars Academy Prime 13U, 2
Rising Stars Gold 13U defeated All Stars Academy Prime 13U, 14-2, in the 13U Memorial Day Blast championship game. Zach Wendell and Shea Grady of the Rising Stars were named the 13U tournament's co-Most Valuable Players. The Rising Stars (6-0) outscored their opponents 78-16. All Stars Academy Prime 13U held a 35-22 runs advantage on its opponents.



14U

All-Stars Academy Elite 14U 8, Marucci Philadelphia 0
All Stars Academy Elite 14U defeated Marucci Philadelphia, 8-0, in the 14U Memorial Day Blast championship game. Austin Edwards of All Stars Academy Elite was named the 14U tournament's Most Valuable Player. All Stars Academy Elite (6-0) outscored its opponents 63-15. Marucci Philadelphia (4-1-1) held a 38-26 runs advantage on its opponents.



15U

A's Prospects 2022 National 5, BBA Elite, 3
A's Prospects 2022 National defeated BBA Elite, 5-3, in the 15U Memorial Day Blast championship game. The A's Prospects awarded the Most Valuable Player to its entire team. A's Prospects (2-3) was outscored in the 15U tournament 21-20. BBA Elite (3-2) held a 27-15 runs advantage on its opponents.