

Feature: At quarter-mark of season, Bees use camaraderie, love of the game to work through season's challenges



It was a cool May evening at New Britain Stadium as Bees fans poured into the building to watch their team play baseball at full-capacity for the first time in over a year. After a last place finish in the shortened 2020 season, there was a feeling of “here we go again,” when the home team fell behind 6-1 in only the third inning. But something special happened that night, something that would set the tone for the season ahead and guide the Bees through tough games when all else failed: They fought back. The Bees mustered 10 consecutive runs en route to an 11-6 Opening Day victory where they won a game and built an identity in the same evening.

At the quarter-point of the 2021 season in the Futures Collegiate Baseball League of New England, the Bees sit 10-12. It is usually at this point of the season that team's find their identity, the thing that defines them as a group on and off the field. Some teams are great at pitching, some teams are great at hitting and some rare teams are great at both. When I asked New Britain's brain trust (head coach Donnie McKillop and General Manager Bret Derosa) what the team's identity is, they both offered the same unique answer: The team just flat out enjoys playing baseball. “I think we're a great team. I think our [players] stay together as a unit,” McKillop said. “We just love playing baseball.”

Team chemistry and love of the game are hard to quantify, but the New Britain Bees have embodied them all year long. Though they rank fourth of the eight teams in the FCBL in batting average (.242) and sixth in team earned-run-average (4.77), the Bees are a resilient group. They began the year 5-2, then lost seven straight games. Since then, they have won five of their last eight games with three wins in four games over the first and second place teams in the FCBL (Brockton and Pittsfield). “We’re very confident in this team,” GM Bret Derosa said. “We went through a tough stretch early but we think this team can compete with anyone. This is what we expect and I think this is what we’ll continue to see.”

More than just piecing together winning streaks, the Bees have the uncanny ability to never truly be out of a game. New Britain has trailed at some point during six of their 10 victories this season. In two of those wins, they trailed by as many as five runs before ultimately coming back on top. They just never quit, and their coach has noticed. “We can take the lead early and keep it or we can get down and understand how to go at it brick-by-brick and chip away when we’re down and stay the course,” McKillop said.

McKillop also mentioned that much of the team’s success, as it does with all teams, hinges on the type of performance they get from their starting pitcher. The Bees are 3-2 in the five games where their starter has gone six or more innings, and they are 7-10 when they do not. They are 2-1 when their starter pitches seven innings. “When we get a good quality start, we know we can beat anyone,” he said.

No one is saying the Bees are perfect. No one is saying they don’t have work to do to make the playoffs. But when the team plays for each other as the Bees so often do, the proverbial marathon of a full season is just that much easier. “It’s a long season. It’s a grind so you have to like who you’re coming to play with,” Derosa said. “I think we have that.”