

Red Top wins 6th IVL title in row

Written by Jim Ecker

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SOLON - It's a dynasty, plain and simple.

Red Top captured its sixth Iowa Valley League title in a row Sunday when it blanked Walford, 6-0 and 1-0, in a doubleheader at the Solon High School field.

They began playing baseball in the Iowa Valley League in 1935, and in all that time nobody had ever won six straight titles before. Teams had won five straight crowns, but never six.

Red Top has it all: Good players, good leadership, good coaching and a solid organization.

"We always have good talent," said Ben Rettenmeier, who tossed a five-hit shutout in the opener, "but I think it's the leadership. We've got coaches playing, we've got guys from big schools that have stepped up in big spots.

"We have a connection from playing together so long," he said. "We mesh well and have a good time together."

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Red Top raised its record to 12-2, giving it an insurmountable lead in the standings with just one week left in the regular season.

"We've got a really good core," said Red Top Manager Adam Sadler, who has been a player and coach for the top team for 20 years. "We've had that group of core guys that's been here 6-7-8 years. We've kept that group together this whole time.

"We've kept that core together and filled in with younger guys, getting that young blood in there too. That core group of guys kind of teaches them and shows them how we do it."

They do it with smart baseball, with savvy players who know how to win tight games. They've got two former minor leagues on the club with shortstop Tyler Rahmatulla (Double-A Cardinals) and catcher/first baseman Tyler Howe (Single-A Mets).

They've got high school coaches on the team with Howe, the head coach at Northeast Goose Lake, and Casey Pauli, an assistant with top-ranked Cedar Rapids Prairie. Other Red Top players are assistants on the prep level as well.

Fritz Kinzenbaw, who founded the Red Top program in the 1970's, is still active with the team and helps coach first base. Kinzenbaw handed the managerial reins five years ago to Sadler, who began playing for Red Top when he was 18 and is running the club at 38.



Sadler played at Kirkwood and Texas A&M-Corpus Christi and he's coached at Wheaton College, Kirkwood, Corpus Christi, Prairie and in the Northwoods League.

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Sadler still likes coming to the ballpark and pulling on the uniform, even when it's 90 degrees and humid like it was Sunday.

"For me, it's the guys and being around baseball," said Sadler, who is one of the top executives at Sadler Power Train, the family business. "I love to manage the game. And it makes it fun when we've got a group like this, because you have options and I can go to different guys in different situations. That's fun for me.

"We've got a lot of guys who have played a lot of baseball," he said. "These guys have played high-level college baseball, some have played professional baseball. They've been in those situations. When we get into tight situations they know what to do."

Rettenmeier, a Cedar Rapids Jefferson grad who played at Kirkwood and Wartburg, is making a strong bid for Pitcher of the Year honors in the Iowa Valley League this season. He's got a 3-0 record with three saves and has not allowed a run all season, according to team statistics.

Rettenmeier began the season as the closer for Red Top, but he's pitched back-to-back shutouts against Norway and Walford in Red Top's drive for its seventh straight title. Rettenmeier helped Red Top clinch this year's crown with the 6-0 victory in the opener Sunday.

"I like the closing role better. Show everything in one inning and get it done," he said. "But when they need someone to start, I'm not afraid to start."

Rettenmeier, 24, compiled a 15-4 record during his two years at Wartburg, graduating in 2014. His arm was a little tender after tossing all seven innings on Sunday, but he was not complaining.

"It's felt better. I'm not going to lie," he said. "But it feels good. I still have everything going for me."

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Like many former college players, Rettenmeier is not ready to hang up his spikes. "I really don't have anything else to do on Sunday, so why not come out and throw," he remarked.

Red Top took a 1-0 lead in the bottom of the second inning in the opener when Pauli belted a lead-off double and scored on a two-out, broken-bat single by Tyler Howe. Red Top scored two runs in the fifth inning to make it 3-0. One run scored on an RBI single by Jordan Howe and another run scored when Nick Day was hit by a pitch with the bases loaded.

Red Top added three more runs in the sixth inning to clinch the victory.

Cole Baker and Drew Yanecek combined for another shutout for Red Top in the second game. Baker pitched four innings for the victory and Yanecek retired nine straight batters for a three-inning save.

Nick Day belted a home run in the second inning for the only run in the nightcap. Austin Stroschein was the hard-luck loser for Walford, which fell to 7-7 for the season.