

## Another slow start ends in fourth straight league loss for Bee Jays

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By EARL WATT

- Leader & Times

By the time the Liberal Bee Jays scored their first run in the fifth inning Wednesday against the Hays Larks, they were already looking up from a 5-0 hole.

The Bee Jays scored three runs in the fifth inning to cut the lead to 5-3, but they could not climb any higher and lost their fourth straight Jayhawk League game.

The bullpen again had to be asked to stop the bleeding, and again they did, but it was too little, too late after falling behind early.

The pattern has become a familiar one for the Bee Jays on a nightmare of a road trip that has seen the Bee Jays fall from a tie for third in the Jayhawk League to fifth.

Just a week ago, the Bee Jays were 8-3 overall and 4-3 in the Jayhawk League and just a game-and-a-half out of first place.

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Today, the Bee Jays find themselves at 8-7 overall, 4-7 in the Jayhawk League and six games out of first.

And the pattern in the seven losses has been all too familiar — Liberal falls behind early, the bullpen stops the bleeding, and the bats come alive late only to fall one or two runs short.

All four losses have come at two runs or less. The three losses at El Dorado were all one-run losses, and one of those games took 13 innings before the Broncos scored the winning run. El Dorado scored in the bottom of the ninth in the final game of the series to knock off the Bee jays by a lone run for the third straight game.

Against Hays, the Bee Jay loss was a two-run affair, but the pattern of falling behind early continued.

The Bee jays will try to salvage one win on the five-game road trip tonight in a rematch with league-leading Hays.

Tyler Wiedenfeld will take the mound for the Bee Jays. Wiedenfeld has become the most reliable starter so far for the Bee Jays, and they will need a quality effort to stop the downhill slide.

The Bee Jays will return to the friendly confines of Brent Gould Field Friday to open a three-game set with Wellington, the only Jayhawk League team that Liberal has not played so far this season.

For Liberal to be successful, coach Brandon Kitch said the starting pitching cannot fall behind big early.

“Same as El Dorado,” Kitch said. “We have to get quality starts out of our pitchers. We are giving up too big of innings early. After the second we beat them 3-0. Obviously we play nine

innings. You can't give up two runs in the first and go back out there and give up three more in the second."

Justin Bethard fell behind early but settled in and didn't allow another run, nor did the bullpen.

But the hole was already dug.

"Walks are killing us," Kitch said. "What hurt us last night was not having (Alec) Isaac or (Tanner) Dearman in the line-up. We could have used their legs. We missed two or three hits out of those guys."

Wiedenfeld will have to end the skid and try to start a rally of Bee Jay starting pitchers.

"The last four games, we get up on the mound, and in the first two innings we think guys aren't competing at the plate, so we throw it up there and hopefully they won't hit it," Kitch said. "We overthrow, we walk guys."

Because of the struggles on the mound, Kitch has adjusted the starting rotation beginning this coming homestand against Wellington.

Chad Nack will take the mound Friday followed by Haydon Howard and Austin King.

"We are going to get some quality starts," Kitch said. "Nack will compete, (Tanner) Rainey will compete. All the guys are competing — (Zach) Reding, (Dylan) Delso, (Seth) Stevens, (Darian) McLemore. They have figured it out and they are getting mad at the results of our games. We have to keep our head above water and make a good run at it."

It starts by winning the close games.

“I remember last year we were winning the one run games, and its’ because we were getting quality starts,” Kitch said. “You have to get quality starts. This is building character. You can only get punched in the face so many times before you start punching back — on the mound and at the plate at times.”

But Kitch was not shy about emphasizing the importance of getting quality pitching form the first inning through the ninth.

“Everything starts on the mound,” he said. “Everything.”

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