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By EARL WATT

- Leader & Times

With nine games remaining in the Jayhawk League season for the Bee Jays, a loss Wednesday night would have made a run to the NBC World Series next to impossible.

But a strong start from Cody Tillotson coupled with solid relief and a key triple play by the Bee Jay defense led to a 6-4 Liberal win and kept the Bee Jays within a game-and-a-half of third place.

Finishing in the top three is critical since the NBC has reformatted the World Series tournament.

While there are three wild card positions for the entire field, NBC organizers have indicated that those spots are for additional leagues and non-NBC teams that fit the semi-pro criteria.

The only three positions that are guaranteed a spot in the tournament from the Jayhawk League are the top three finishers.

Liberal turned a rare triple play against Wellington to end a scoring threat in the fifth inning when the Heat had already scored a run and had the bases loaded.

After the triple play, Wellington only managed one run the rest of the game, and the Bee Jays were able to make the six runs stick.

Bee Jays turn triple play in 6-4 win

Thursday, 11 July 2013 10:15

After Brandon Kitch relieved Tillotson with Jack Mabe with the bases loaded and no outs in the fifth inning, Mabe walked the first batter he faced to give the Heat a run.

But the next Wellington batter hit a smash down the third base line, and John Mestas laid out and snagged the ball in the air. He stepped on third for the second out, and then fired across to first to complete the triple play.

“It shocked everybody,” Kitch said. “It was a big time play. It killed their momentum.”

Mabe was able to protect the lead before turning the ball over to Tyler Buss who shut the door on the Heat.

“Cody Tillotson did a great job,” Kitch said. “I told him to trick them, keep them off balance, throw breaking ball for a strike and he did. He gave us four strong innings.”

The Bee Jays erupted early with two home runs in the first, and after adding another run scored three more in the top of the fourth to take a 6-2 lead.

Even when the Bee Jays were thrown out, Kitch said they Liberal batters didn't make it easy.

“Even balls we made outs on have been hard outs,” he said. “We had 13-14 hits. We are hitting the ball right at them, barreling up everything. We are starting to swing it really good.”

The ability to put the ball in play, coupled with lock-down bullpen appearances has kept the Bee Jays in the hunt for the final nine games of the league season. Liberal is four games out of first but has two games against Hays over the weekend. The Bee Jays can also help their cause next week when second-place El Dorado comes to Liberal for a three-game series. The Bee Jays also have three games remaining with Dodge City.

“This group of guys wants to win,” Kitch said. “They know how to win, it’s just a matter of executing — on the mound, good at bats, defense, handle the baseball, and not giving teams extra outs.” There’s guys that we brought in last couple of weeks as real competitors.

Some late arrivals have also shored up the Bee Jay defense and provided additional power at the plate.

“I think Brady Capshaw has struck out less than a handful of times,” Kitch said. “That is competing. If he gets out it’s a hard out. He knows the zone.”

Outfielder Jason Dahl has also become an additional threat.

That combination of new players with the group that has been wearing the powder blue and red most of the summer has started to develop a pattern of success. The Bee Jays have recovered from being four games under .500 and can even their record with a win tonight.

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