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Article updated: 5/18/2011 9:28 PM

St. Charles N. knocks East out of 1st

By

The wild and wacky Upstate Eight Conference River race took another unexpected twist Wednesday.

Having battled its way back into first place Tuesday by beating rival St. Charles North to halt a 3-game losing streak, St. Charles East sent Kansas-bound ace Wes Benjamin to the mound on its home field Wednesday.

The same Benjamin who hadn't lost all year — that is until the North Stars' John Munyon tossed his first complete game back at the Saints. Eight different North Stars had hits off Benjamin, and St. Charles North left East with a 6-3 victory.

The win moves the North Stars (23-9, 17-6) within a half game of the Saints (22-10, 18-6) in the UEC River. Both teams are chasing Streamwood (26-5, 19-5), who rallied to beat Geneva 9-6 Wednesday and clinch a share of the River title.

"We've got to take care of tomorrow and get some help," Saints coach Dave Haskins said. "It's not what I wanted but it is what it is."

Wednesday's win was satisfying on several levels for the North Stars. Beating Benjamin for starters, and also bouncing back from a 7-2 loss to the Saints Tuesday at Elfstrom Stadium.

"Last night was tough," Munyon said. "I think we were all ready for this game."

Most importantly, the win kept the North Stars' conference title hopes alive. In addition to needing to beat the Saints Thursday and hope for a Streamwood loss to Geneva, they have a makeup game with Metea Valley that they haven't been able to reschedule.

"We were ready," North Stars coach Todd Genke said. "Our kids really responded today. We obviously didn't play well yesterday so we wanted to show we are a good team and are still in the hunt."

St. Charles North grabbed a 1-0 lead with an unearned run in the first. Andrew Elliot singled, stole second and took third on a bad throw. Munyon drove him in with a fly ball to right.

After a double by Jake Sheley helped the Saints tie the game in the second, the North Stars' Derek Backer and David Gow both stroked shots to right field for a double and triple, respectively, in the third to regain a 2-1 lead.

The North Stars gave themselves some breathing room with a 3-run fourth inning. John Brodner led off with an opposite field home run to right, the only hard hit ball off Benjamin in the inning.

Brodner was 0-for-7 in his previous 7 at-bats against Benjamin with 7 strikeouts.

"I just went into this game thinking the same as always," Brodner said. "He's a good pitcher. I was expecting curve (first pitch) and he didn't throw it for a strike, and assumed he would come with a fastball and it kind of tailed over

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the middle third of the plate. I just went with the pitch.”

Jake Johansmeier and Jake Bergren reached on an infield single and bunt single. Genke sent his runners which kept them out of a double play and put men at second and third with two outs.

No. 9 hitter Matt Thomas got just enough of a Benjamin offering to drop a soft liner into shallow center for a 2-run single and a 5-1 lead.

“You’ve got to get production out of everybody,” Genke said. “It was almost exact opposite of last night. We couldn’t move people around because we got down early.”

Down 6-1 in the sixth, the Saints scored twice and brought the tying run to the plate in both the sixth and seventh innings. Tony Rallo added to his school RBI record with a run-scoring single to make it 6-3, but Munyon retired Johnny Hondlik and Brian Sobieski to end the inning.

The Saints also put two runners on in the seventh before Munyon ended the game getting Jordan Hayes to line out to right.

“I really wanted that game so I tried to bear down and get it and kept battling,” Munyon said.

Munyon finished with 4 strikeouts and 3 walks while allowing 6 hits to improve to 6-0; Benjamin fanned 9 and walked none but gave up 9 hits in 6 innings to fall to 7-1.

“We all know he’s of the best pitchers in the conference,” Munyon said of Benjamin. “I like the competition and I wanted it and I asked coach in the beginning of the season for this game.”

Munyon got plenty of help. First baseman Backer, the only player on either team with 2 hits, started a 3-6-1 double play to get out of the fourth.

Munyon also was efficient, needing just 6 pitches to retire the Saints in the third. He needed that later to finish the game with Genke warming up Johansmeier and nearly making a change.

“I was halfway out there a couple times,” Genke said. “I was about ready to take him out. John Munyon was the story today.”

The series concludes at 4:30 p.m. Thursday at North with the North Stars’ Phil Warner facing either Hondlik, Joe Hoscheit or Kyle Manske.

Every time it looked like St. Charles East was in control of the UEC race it has proved to be fleeting. The Saints won a 9-inning thriller over Streamwood last Friday to grab a 2-game lead, then promptly got swept by Geneva the next day.

Now after losing on their home field with their ace, it’s must-win time in the series finale Thursday.

“It was a very sloppy game from pitching, defense and offense,” Haskins said. “They just didn’t play good baseball today.”