

Jays slip in playoff series after strong start



By Jeff Doner

The Aurora Blue Jays came out to start their first round playoff series guns a blazing, but have since slipped a little against the Clearview Orioles.

Despite winning the first two games of the best of five series, the Jays have since been unable to bury the Orioles, with a third win, leaving the series tied at two games apiece.

"One of my favourite things about baseball is that it is a game of averages," said Jays' catcher Rob Wilson. "Over a five game series, I know we're a better team and I know we'll come back. I wouldn't change anything we've done. We're too good of a team to have that result come back and beat us."

In game one last Tuesday, the Jays were buoyed by a solid performance from starting pitcher Ian Milne, who threw a complete game shutout for a 3-0 win at Lambert Willson Park.

Sitting at the top of the batting order, Chris Bloom and Stephen Vallee proved to be steady, providing all the offence the Jays would need, each collecting two hits and scoring all three runs.

Feeling confident with their win, the Jays went on the road to Clearview for game two the following night.

With scheduled starter Brent Owen unable to take the mound, seldom-used pitcher Nate Drury had to make an emergency start. He did not disappoint, going four and a third innings for his squad in an important game.

"They gave me a chance," said a surprised Drury. "I think I was expecting to go maybe one or two innings, but things just went along and I did better than usual."

Despite the fact that he hasn't pitched much this season, Drury was throwing some nasty pitches that seemed to catch the opponent off guard. This, along with the run support from his teammates, helped Drury to lock down a game two win.

"It's good to always have the run support," he said. "A lot of bats have been going well and I don't think there have been many strikeouts. Everyone was hitting well and we scored 10 runs, so the offense has been good."

Drury's teammates praised the play of their pitcher and his ability to pitch in a clutch situation.

'He was stellar,' said catcher Chris Fafalios. 'His curveball was nasty, his fastball was tailing and he was just spot on the entire time. The ump was giving us the right calls, but he was just stellar. He was spotting his pitches exactly where I wanted them, even the knuckleball. For not pitching much this year and going in there and pitching almost five innings, that's really impressive.'

The Jays were able to get on the board early in game two. With Bloom leading off and Vallee behind him, again the Jays showed their ability to get on base and score runs.

Going into the top of the fifth, the Jays held on to a 3 ? 0 lead until Fafalios drilled a solo home run to put his team up 4 ? 0. Shortly after, Ian Rettie once again brought in Bloom for another run.

The Orioles would score a couple in the bottom of the inning to make the Jays sweat, but they turned on the offence in the sixth, scoring five more runs to solidify a 10 ? 3 win.

Fafalios said he was relieved to hit his fourth home run of the season and said he felt like things are starting to come around with his bat again.

'It felt awesome, because I haven't been hitting the last 10 to 15 games. I've just been working on my stride and obviously it has started working,' he said. 'Last night was a tight game, but we pulled through.'

The next two games weren't so pretty for the Jays as they allowed Clearview to even things up with a 6 ? 4 loss on Thursday and a close 8 ? 7 loss on Sunday night, making Tuesday's game a must win.

On Sunday night, the Jays carried a 5 ? 1 lead after two innings. But the Orioles came right back to tie it.

'Right after that, Ryan Lewis came into the dugout and said something to the effect of, 'I'm too fired up to talk, I just want to hit a baseball,' and he went out and hit the first pitch of that inning out of the park,' said Wilson.

That put the Jays up 6 ? 5 and the teams would continue to trade leads throughout the rest of the game, until Clearview added a few runs to take the lead for good.

The Jays tried to claw back in the bottom of the seventh, but were shut down with a diving catch in the outfield by Jerry O'Hara, leaving the tying run on third.

The series finale comes back to Aurora on Tuesday night and the Jays remain confident and hope that starting pitcher Brent Owen can regain his regular season form.

'We want him to bounce back,' Wilson said. 'He's been one of our best pitchers this year and he wasn't happy with his performance on Thursday. There's some room for improvement and he acknowledges that. We said to him after the game that he's going to get the ball and we fully expect him to be the pitcher he has been all year.'

Added Fafalios: 'I think we've got to go with the same approach. Don't be cocky, just come in there and take it pitch by pitch and just try to pull out the win.'