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U8 travel baseball team captures Montville crown

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GLEN RIDGE - The Glen Ridge U8 travel baseball team won the Montville championship on Father's Day, defeating Mount Olive, 2-1, in a remarkable game under the lights. This was the first year that the Glen Ridge Athletic Association supported a U8 team.

The journey for most of these young boys began in 2008 when coach Richard Gaul developed a program for them that concentrated on fundamentals and working as a team.

The majority of the boys played in a 2008 fall league when they were all 7 years old. Coaches Gaul, Tony Mitzak and Lee Haberman's goal was to teach them how to

work together and trust each other, but most of all, to have fun and enjoy playing baseball.

The 2008 spring season was a challenge, when due to field availability the GRAA felt it could not support a team at the U8 level for the season. A final-hour decision was made to allow the coaches to field a U8 team and Glen Ridge had its first-ever U8 travel baseball program off and running.

This year the Montville league fielded eight teams at the U8 level. The teams were made up of boys from Glen Ridge, Wayne, two teams, Mount Olive, North Caldwell, West Essex, two teams, and Montville.

Strong pitching made this young team a force to be reckoned with. Led by Aidan Gaul, Max Haberman and Jack Cotrone on the mound with solid fielding coming from John Mitzak, Tyler Strong, Elijah Robinson, Cole Greenberg, Simon Ogilvie, Jack Bagin, Ege Zeybek, Aidan Laszlo, Owen Hannigan, Tyler Fazekas and Ronan Sidoti, the boys played eight regular-season games, recording three shutouts. Glen Ridge had a great regular season with a 5-3 record with all the losses coming by only one run.

With a fourth-place finish in the regular season, Glen Ridge faced the West Essex Grey team in the first round of the playoffs. With a win against West Essex, Glen Ridge moved on to play the league's undefeated powerhouse, Wayne PAL, in the semifinals. The game took place in Wayne under the lights. The boys from Glen Ridge won an exciting game by the score of 3-1. With dominating pitching from Haberman and Cotrone, they combined to shut out Wayne in the first four innings.

The offense was led by the hitting of Sidoti and solid fielding by all the boys. The ball was then given to Gaul to close out the final two innings. Gaul struck out six batters and allowed one unearned run, giving Glen Ridge the win and Wayne its first loss of the season, thereby eliminating Wayne from playoff contention.



The Glen Ridge U8 baseball team won the Montville championship. Back row from left are coach Tony Mitzak, Owen Hannigan, Jack Cotrone, Ege Zeybek, Tyler Fazekas, Elijah Robinson, Tyler Strong, Aidan Laszlo, Cole Greenberg and coach Richard Gaul; front row from left, Simon Ogilvie, bat boy Will Greenberg, Aidan Gaul, John Mitzak, Jack Bagin, Max Haberman and Ronan Sidoti

Father's Day, June 21, found the U8 Glen Ridge team sitting in Montville in the rain waiting to play Mount Olive for the championship. As the fields in Montville were unplayable, Mount Olive coach Mike Whelan put his ground crew to work to provide a field in Mount Olive for an evening championship game. Although the Glen Ridge team had spent Mother's Day in Mount Olive - a heartbreaking, one run, walk-off loss that cost it second place for the regular season - the team was eager to play for the championship.

With a packed bleachers and standing room-only crowd, the boys from Mount Olive and Glen Ridge took the field. In the first inning, Glen Ridge loaded the bases with singles by Haberman and Gaul and a walk to Cotrone, but could not push across a run. In the bottom of the first, Cotrone dominated the Mount Olive hitters by striking out the side.

In the second inning, Mount Olive returned the favor by also striking out the side. Mount Olive loaded the bases in the bottom of the second, but Cotrone struck out the final batter to close out the inning.

A single by Zeybek was all Glen Ridge could muster in the top of the third. The bottom of the third started with a great defensive play by second baseman Mitzak for the first out. Haberman was on the mound for Glen Ridge and struck out the next two batters.

In the top of the fourth, Haberman and Gaul led off with back-to-back singles. Hannigan then moved Haberman to third on a fielder's choice. With runners on the corners, Tyler Strong's clutch hitting drove in the first run of the game.

In the Mount Olive half of the fourth inning, Glen Ridge's Haberman continued with great stuff on the mound. With good defense from Strong at third and a nice catch by Greenberg at first, the boys held on to a 1-0 lead. In the top of the fifth with two outs, consecutive singles by Bagin and Zeybek put Glen Ridge runners on first and second. But Glen Ridge failed to add to the lead.

Gaul was handed the ball and took the mound to pitch a scoreless fifth inning. Shortstop Bagin tossed to an outstretched Haberman at first for the critical out of the inning.

Leading by only one run, the Glen Ridge team needed some insurance runs. Mount Olive walked the leadoff batter Haberman. Gaul came to the plate and drove the ball to right field for a double. Haberman, running all the way, took home with a hard slide to give Glen Ridge the insurance run it needed.

Gaul once again took the mound for what would be a dramatic finish to a great season for the team. The big bats came to the plate in the bottom of the sixth for Mount Olive. With nerves running high and fielding errors, Mount Olive loaded the bases with no outs and Glen Ridge leading 2-0. The cleanup batter for Mount Olive stepped to the plate and hit an infield pop that had Gaul diving off the mound to snare the ball and hold the runners from scoring for the first out.

The next batter struck out leaving Mount Olive with one last hope. With a full count, the No. 5 hitter drew a walk that brought in the first run for Mount Olive and left Glen Ridge clinging to a one-run lead. With two outs in the sixth, bases loaded and the score 2-1, Mount Olive had one final crack at bat.

With the parents, fans and coaching staff from both teams on their feet, the final Mount Olive batter hit a high pop fly that had all the baserunners on the move. Gaul settled under the ball and made the catch that sealed the championship for Glen Ridge.

As the spring season comes to an end, head coach Tony Mitzak said, "This team defined who they were very early in the season. They showed up for practices ready to work and they showed up for

games ready to compete. They supported each other all season long and their effort is evident in the results.”

The team would like to also thank coach Lee Haberman for his time and effort, as well as all the other parents who contributed to a great spring season. A big thanks to bat boy Will Greenberg, who did a great job all season.

For the Glen Ridge dads and moms, it could not have been a better Father’s Day gift.

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