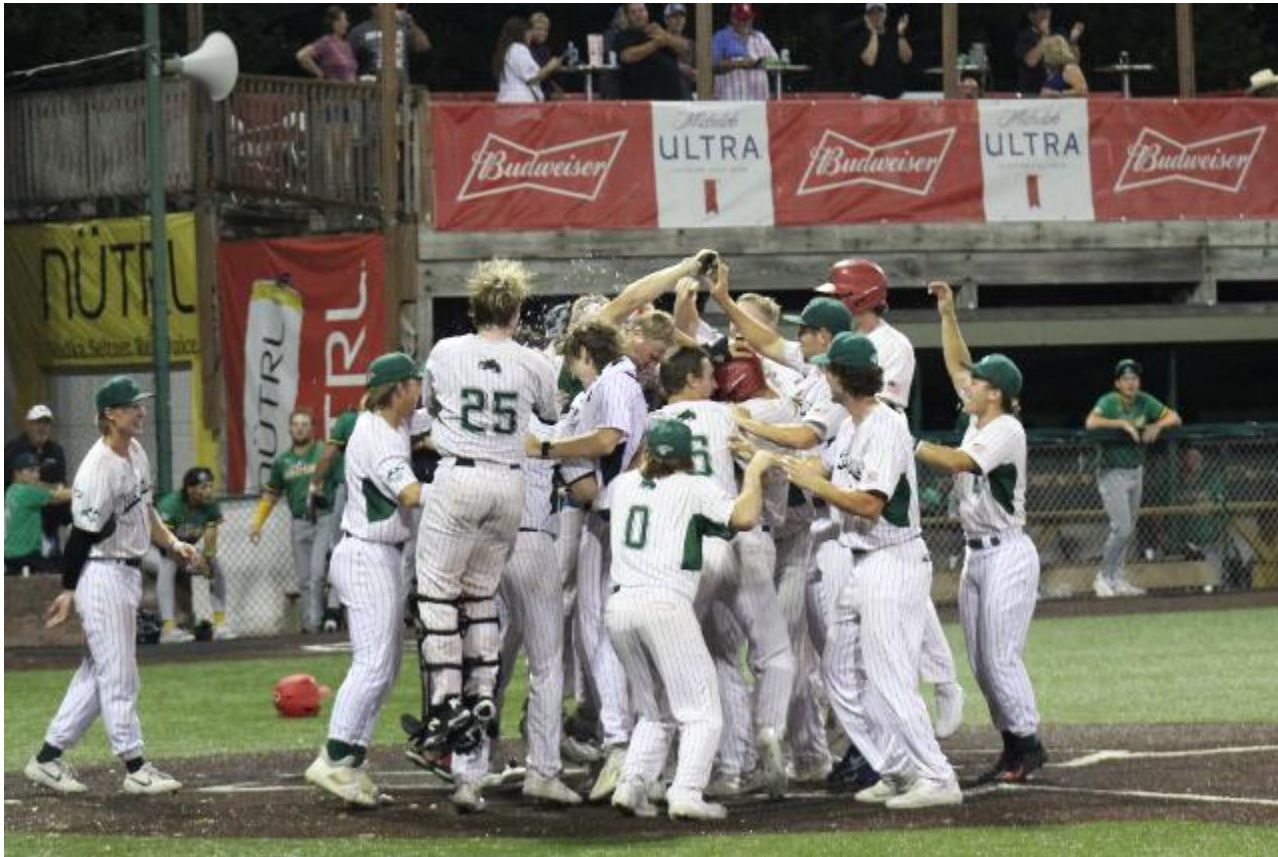


River Dragons Walk-Off 2023 Home Finale

by Nathan Tucker, Sports Reporter
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ALTON - Friday night was the final Alton River Dragons home game of the 2023 Prospect League season, and the Dragons sent a big crowd home happy.

A tight, back-and-forth game of baseball between the River Dragons and the Cape Catfish ended with one loud crack of Erik Broekemeier's bat. The hosts walked off 6-5 winners.

Both teams would score in the first, a sign of things to come early. Like a frantic heavyweight fight, both teams came out swinging in the early frames.

The River Dragons would jump out to a 4-1 lead after the third inning. An Erik Broekemeier single brought home Drake Westcott, and Broekemeier would score on a sac fly.

The fourth inning saw the Cape Catfish punch back, scoring three runs to tie the game right back up at four apiece. Heavy traffic on the basepaths caused fits for the River Dragons starter Nolan Wilson.

Walks got the Alton hurler into trouble, and a fielder's choice and a single drove home two runs to close the score. The third run of the inning walked home, which spelled the beginning of the end for Wilson on the mound.

Drake Westcott made his offensive presence felt, as he has done so often in River Dragons pinstripes. Westcott sent a towering blast into the trees beyond the right field fence in the 5th inning to put Alton back on top.

That's when the bullpens took over. In relief for Wilson was SIU-Edwardsville's Dimitri Ivetic, who possibly had his best outing of the year. He pitched four innings of shutout baseball, locking down a Cape Catfish offense that looked to go toe-to-toe with the firepower of the River Dragons.

"We've been talking about this as a team," said Dallas Martz. "Don't go out there and try to win the game by yourself, just go out and compete. Good things will happen."

Those four innings were more than Ivetic had thrown all season, which was part of the decision to take him out of the game in lieu for Lucas Johns to close the door. If only it were that easy.

Once again, traffic on the basepaths cost the Dragons, as Cape was able to drive home the tying run with just one out in the 9th. The energy at Lloyd Hopkins Field had shifted, and Cape had the momentum with the bases loaded.

In stepped Scott Detweiler for Alton to relieve Johns. Detweiler kept his nerve to strand the bases loaded and give the River Dragons a fighting chance in the bottom of the 9th, with their heavy hitters coming up.

"He did great," said Martz. "He came in, battled, it took him a little bit but he didn't break."

Drake Westcott swung like he was trying to hit one over Spencer T. Olin golf course, and ground out to first base to his frustration. Next up was Erik Broekemeier.

Broekemeier took advantage of a pitch that caught a lot of plate and crushed a walk-off bomb over the left-field fence. There was jubilation around Lloyd Hopkins Field, and not just because it was fireworks night.

While it wasn't the best of seasons for the River Dragons, baseball fans in the Alton area stuck by their Prospect League squad. Friday was no exception, as one of the biggest crowds of the season saw the Dragons walk-off in their home finale.

"I'm glad it's dark for the fireworks right now or you'd see the tears in my eyes," said Dallas Martz after the walk-off win. "I get emotional when I talk about our fan base. I think we have the best fans in the league. Look at tonight, they're here, celebrating this win with us.

"Whether we're winning or losing, they're here the whole time. We look forward to getting back out here in 2024, making a run at the playoffs again, and hopefully we can get a championship banner out there."

