

Owen Sound Baysox ? swept by the Bolton Brewers in the regular season ? capture first NDBL title with 9-6 win over Ivy Rangers

By Jim Stewart

Mike Wallace's powerhouse Bolton Brewers won the 2024 North Dufferin Baseball League pennant with a 19-5-0 record ? one of the most impressive regular season records in the club's 21-year history.

The Brewers pummeled their ten opponents throughout the Spring and Summer, scoring 211 runs in 24 games. The Bolton squad appeared to be on a pathway to win the Strother Cup for the first time since 2021, and looked ready to avenge two narrow defeats at the hands of the New Lowell Knights in the 2022 and 2023 Finals.

However, it was the upstart second-place Baysox (17-5-2) that won the NDBL championship on Saturday afternoon in Ivy.

Owen Sound, in only its third year of operation, defeated the Rangers 9-6 in Game 5 to capture the seven-game series 4-1 and inscribe the Town's name on the Strother Cup for the first time.

By comparison, Bolton has won the NDBL title seven times since it joined the League in 2004, including a Dynastic Era of consecutive titles in 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013, as well as subsequent championships in 2017 and 2021.

The coveted Strother Cup, awarded 88 times since 1931, is one of the oldest athletic trophies in Ontario.

In Game 5 of the 2024 Finals in Ivy on Saturday afternoon, Baysox ace Trevor Smith outdueled Ranger ace Matt Barr. Smith pitched a complete game?giving up six runs on six hits and struck out six Rangers.

League Secretary Scott Anderson presented the Strother Cup to Owen Sound's unique father-son duo of Head Coach Don Bartley and two-way player Ryan Bartley. The Paul Carruthers Award for Playoff MVP was won by Owen Sound's Greg Slater who led the Baysox offensively, including multiple-hit performances in Games 1 and 5 of the championship series.

The Baysox championship run was not overly surprising. Owen Sound was the most improved squad over the course of the regular season in the 11-team loop. They demonstrated that improvement and their status as a contender in a key two-game series on the regular season's final weekend versus the seven-time champion Brewers.

Although the Brewers swept both games against the Baysox, both contests were ?nail biters? and had a playoff feel to them. Bolton walked off the Baysox 5-4 on July 25 at North Hill Park and eked out a 12-11 win four nights later at Tom Williams Baseball Field in Owen Sound to clinch the NDBL pennant on the last day of the regular season. The Brewers dismantled eighth-place Orillia in the first round of the playoffs and seemed en-route to an eighth championship, but the Ivy Rangers eliminated the Brewers from Strother Cup contention in a shocking semifinal upset to punch their ticket to the championship series.

Brewers' Head Coach Mike Wallace, who has been a player and coach for all of the franchise's seven championships, weighed in on the Baysox victory and the difficulty of winning titles in the NDBL: ?It's incredibly hard to win the Senior championship in the NDBL.?

?It's been won by either Bolton, Creemore, New Lowell, or Ivy for around the last thirty years. This Baysox team has upset the apple cart, but I couldn't be happier for them. I have had the pleasure of playing against Bart Sr. and Bart Jr. [Owen Sound's father-son combo Don and Ryan Bartley] over the years.?

Coach Wallace reflected on the incredible success he's had with the Brewers?including a stretch when Bolton captured seven championships in eleven years from 2009 to 2021, not including the Pandemic-cancelled 2020 season. When asked about the secret

to the Brewers' sustained success, including the Dynastic title run of five in a row (2009-2013), the veteran player-coach acknowledged "the team that is going to win multiple championships in the NDBL definitely has to have an incredible core."

"We've had a strong core of players for all those championships" Brett Chater, John Hutchison, Steve Warden, Greg Keenan, and myself "but many of the players from our earlier championship teams have retired. We had an incredible run and after the five championships in a row, we played a hybrid NDBL and GTBL schedule during which we had almost 80 games per year for two years, including tournaments, two sets of playoffs, and Canadian Elimination events. It was a lot of winning baseball that included an Ontario championship for Bolton in 2009."

It's true that Bolton, New Lowell, Creemore, and Ivy have dominated the 96-year-old NDBL for the last three decades, but Owen Sound has worked its way into the winners' circle with an impressive title run in 2024.