

BACK WHERE THEY BELONG

By Ben Chiswick



Following a three-year post-season drought, the West Michigan Whitecaps are heading back to the playoffs after clinching their first division title in seven years.

The West Michigan Whitecaps have a proud history of success. With five Midwest League championships in the relatively brief 20-year history of the franchise, the Whitecaps rank third among the league's 16 active teams in Midwest League titles. Only Wisconsin (9) and Quad Cities (6), who have both been league members for more than 50 years, have claimed more Midwest League championships. The 'Caps have qualified for the playoffs 15 times in 21 seasons, making their recent three-year stretch without a post-season berth the longest such drought in franchise history.

But, under the guidance of first-year manager Andrew Graham, the Whitecaps are heading back to the playoffs for the first time since 2010. Sporting the best team West Michigan has seen in quite some time, the Whitecaps punched their ticket to the post-season by virtue of a 41-29 record in the first half, edging division rival South Bend by a half-game to earn the Midwest League's first-half Eastern Division title.

"It was a great half," said Graham. "We wanted to make the playoffs in the first half and winning the first half outright was a little extra cherry on top. The city of Grand Rapids and West Michigan haven't been to the playoffs the last three years. They expect and they want to go to the playoffs every year, so it was good to bring it back to Grand Rapids for the fans and for the front office."

The Midwest League – like many minor leagues – splits its season into two halves. After the All-Star break, every team starts fresh with a 0-0 record, essentially creating two mini-seasons within the Midwest League's 140-game schedule. The top two teams in each division at the end of each half qualify for the post-season, setting up an eight-team playoff at the end of the full regular season.

By winning the first-half division title in the MWL-East, the Whitecaps earned home field advantage for the first round of the playoffs. West Michigan will open their best-of-three first-round series on the road on September 3 before returning to Fifth Third Ballpark to host Game 2 on Thursday, September 4, and, if necessary, Game 3 on Friday, September 5.

"We're really excited to be back in the playoffs," said Lew Chamberlin, the CEO/Managing Partner of the Whitecaps. "I think it's particularly meaningful this year when we faced a little hardship early in the year [with the ballpark fire in January]. It's a nice gift to the community to get back to the playoffs and it's especially nice to make it in the first half so we have some time to market the playoff game and get a really big crowd out here to support the team."

The Whitecaps' impressive first half was noteworthy on a number of levels. In addition to qualifying for the playoffs for the first time in four years, West Michigan

turned in their first 40-win half since 2009 and clinched their first division title since 2007.

The 2007 season also happened to be the last time the Whitecaps won the Midwest League championship. That playoff run capped the second of back-to-back titles and marked the end of a stretch in which the 'Caps won the league crown three times in four years. That history that is not lost on Graham, who also happens to be the first former Whitecaps' player to return as the club's manager in his post-playing career.

Graham, 32, spent six seasons in the Detroit Tigers' minor league system before injuries halted his career at Triple-A. The former catcher was a member of the West Michigan Whitecaps' 2004 championship squad.

"It was an amazing feeling," recalled Graham. "It's one team, out of the years in the minor leagues that I played, that I still keep in contact with a lot of the guys. It really shows you that if you make the playoffs and you win a championship, you get a real tight bond with the guys that you played with. It's something I'm hoping for these guys."

"I had two goals coming into this season," continued Graham. "One is to develop these players to help the Big League team. The second one is to win a championship. If you win games [and] win championships, ultimately you develop these players to be better players. It would be an amazing feeling – amazing for the guys – to enjoy the experience I got to enjoy [in 2004]."

Having already qualified for the playoffs, the Whitecaps can use the second half of the season to continue focusing on player development while preparing for their pending playoff run. The 'Caps are confident that their hard-fought divisional race in the first half should leave them well-prepared for the drama and pressure that go hand in hand with the increased intensity of the post-season.

After all, with three weeks remaining in the first half, the Whitecaps were reeling from a rough road trip and a long-shot to win the MWL-East.

On May 28, West Michigan was preparing for a three-game series against the Dayton Dragons at Fifth Third Ballpark. The 'Caps had just concluded a 2-4 road trip that ended with consecutive blowout losses in Bowling Green, dropping them to 4.5 games behind the first-place South Bend Silver Hawks. South Bend was in the midst of a red-hot streak in which they won 17 out of 20 games, creating the likelihood that West Michigan and Dayton – who were tied for second place – would be left battling for the Eastern Division wild card spot.

With just 18 games remaining in the half, the Whitecaps and Dragons were poised for a showdown – but the three-game series at Fifth Third Ballpark turned out to be a one-sided affair.

The West Michigan pitching staff dominated the series, allowing just three total runs over the course of a three-game sweep. After an easy 8-1 victory in the opener, the 'Caps got a tie-breaking two-run single from Wynton Bernard in the eighth inning of the second game for a 4-2 final. Then, in front of more than 8,000 fans and hungry for the sweep, West Michigan got seven dominant innings of two-hit baseball from Buck Farmer for a combined five-hit shutout in the series finale. The game ultimately stretched into the 11th inning before a run crossed the plate, ending with a walk-off single by Bennett Pickar for the 1-0 victory. To Graham, the resounding series sweep was a key moment in the Whitecaps' playoff push.

"Dayton was a team that we were worried about," he said. "They were right behind us in the hunt for second place. We just came off a bad road trip... That was the big turning point. That's when the guys got some confidence and saw, 'Hey, we can win this first half.' We ran with it from there."

The sweep sparked the Whitecaps to a hot streak at exactly the right time, starting a stretch in which West Michigan won 11 of 13 games from May 28-June 10. While Dayton faded out of the playoff picture, the Whitecaps continued to surge. Eventually, West Michigan pulled within 2.5 games of South Bend when the Silver Hawks came to Fifth Third Ballpark for a three-game series on June 7.

One again, the Whitecaps rolled through their principal competition in the playoff race. Once again, it was the pitching staff that carried the load. West Michigan did not allow more than two runs in any of the three games and completed another series sweep, decisively outscoring the Silver Hawks, 17-5. Suddenly, it was the Whitecaps who found themselves in first place with a half-game lead over South Bend.

But the Whitecaps and Silver Hawks both knew the division title was far from clinched. One week later, the two clubs were scheduled to close out the first half with a weekend series in South Bend.

As fate would have it, the weekend began with the Silver Hawks nursing a half-game lead in the standings. Essentially, the series became a best-of-three showdown with the division title at stake. The winner would end the half in first place while the loser would have to settle for the wild card spot.

Needless to say, winning the first game was crucial. On a Friday night at Four Winds Field in South Bend, the Whitecaps and Silver Hawks battled through the early stages of the game like two heavyweights in a prize fight. The two clubs were feeling each other out while shaking off the jitters of a high-pressure game. By the end of the sixth inning the score was tied at 2-2, and that deadlock remained as the division rivals went toe-to-toe into extra innings.

In the top of the 11th, the 'Caps took the upper hand when Bernard led off the frame with an infield single. He proceeded to steal second base and advanced to third when the catcher's throw skipped into center field. On the very next pitch, Willy Adames broke the tie with a double that split the gap in right-center. He came around to score later in the inning on a two-out single by Austin Schotts, delivering the Whitecaps a crucial 4-2 win to open the series.

The extra-inning victory officially clinched a playoff berth for the Whitecaps while giving them a leg up in the series. One night later, however, the Silver Hawks answered with a 4-1 win to even the match-up and set up a winner-takes-all first-half finale the next afternoon.

On the final day of the first half, the Whitecaps emerged victorious on the strength of a four-run outburst in the top of the sixth inning. Trailing 1-0, the 'Caps rattled off four consecutive one-out hits to take control. Jeff Holm's RBI-single to center field tied the score while Bernard followed with a base hit to give West Michigan the lead.

Ultimately, the biggest hit came from the littlest man in the lineup. With the bases loaded and two outs, the 5-foot-7 Jose Zambrano blooped a two-run double inside the right field line to give the Whitecaps the decisive 4-1 margin.

Fittingly, the division-clinching win – and most of the Whitecaps' late playoff push – was fueled by the

pitching. West Michigan ended the first half with a league-leading 2.98 ERA and a whopping 631 strikeouts, making the Whitecaps the only Midwest League team to complete the half with a sub-3.00 ERA or more than 600 punch-outs.

When West Michigan hosted the Midwest League All-Star Classic at Fifth Third Ballpark just two days later, the home team boasted a league-high seven All-Stars. Five of them were pitchers, including four members of the Whitecaps' vaunted six-man starting rotation.

"I can remember on one hand how many [starting] outings we had which weren't quality," noted Graham. "The guys went deep into games – five, six, seven innings every time – and gave us a chance to win every game. The starters have really held this team together, the bullpen has just gotten stronger, and our offense is getting better."

"The team is coming together well, and we just need to keep executing and playing the way that we know how to play." With that approach, the Whitecaps are anxiously anticipating the playoffs in September. For the first time in four years, baseball fans in West Michigan will have the chance to watch their team try to add a sixth Midwest League championship trophy to the collection.

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