'CAPS TAKE CARE OF BUSINESS, TOSS THREE-HITTER

FORT WAYNE, IN – In a game that manager Ernie Young called the most important of the year, the West Michigan Whitecaps answered the bell.

Four West Michigan pitchers combined on a three-hit shutout Wednesday night as the hard-charging Whitecaps overcame a complete-game effort by James Needy in a 1-0 win over the Fort Wayne TinCaps at Parkview Field.

Thanks to wins in nine of their last 13 games, West Michigan (34-31, 70-65) has pulled to within one game of Fort Wayne (35-30, 66-69) with five games remaining in the Eastern Divisions' second-half wild card chase. Both teams trail Lake County, who is currently one game ahead of the TinCaps and two games in front of the Whitecaps in pursuit of the top seed.

The winner of the current three-game series between West Michigan and Fort Wayne will also clinch the head-to-head tiebreaker and the three-way tiebreaker in case the trio of playoff contenders end the regular season in a dead heat, making West Michigan's series-opening win on Wednesday night all the more significant.

Wilsen Palacios (12-9) started and got the win, dealing five scoreless innings and allowing just two hits. The 22-year-old Venezuelan showed no rust despite a 10-day layoff, striking out six and walking one on his way to reaching a dozen wins. The only hits he allowed were singles during his final frame, also representing the only time Fort Wayne advanced a runner past first base against him.

The only run of the night crossed the plate in the top of the second inning. Singles by Lance Durham and Pat Leyland helped the Whitecaps put runners at first and second with two outs, but Gabriel Purroy followed with a routine grounder to shortstop. Jace Peterson fielded the ball but sailed his throw over the head of the first baseman, enabling Durham to come around and score.

With a 1-0 lead, piggyback starter Chad Smith picked up where Palacios left off. The University of Southern California product retired all nine of the batters he faced, sprinkling in three strikeouts over three perfect frames.

Meanwhile, TinCaps' starter James Needy (6-3) was turning in a noteworthy pitching performance of his own. Making just his fourth start of the year, the 21-year-old righty went the distance and allowed only four hits – all singles – and one unearned run over his nine innings of work. Needy struck out five without issuing a walk and allowed just one hit after West Michigan took the lead in the second inning.

With a slim one-run edge heading into the ninth, the relief duo of Jade Todd and Melvin Mercedes (9) got the job done against the top of the Fort Wayne lineup.

After the speedy Travis Jankowski opened the inning with a single off Todd, the lefty reliever got Jace Peterson to fly out to right and induced a fielder's choice groundout from Yeison Asencio. The 'Caps got the out at second on the fielder's choice, but the throw to first sailed into the stands as Asencio was granted second base.

With two outs and the potential game-tying run in scoring position, Fort Wayne skipper Jose Valentin called on Mike Gallic to pinch-hit in order to eliminate what would have been a lefty-lefty match-up.

Young countered with his closer, and the hard-throwing Mercedes got Gallic to ground out for his ninth save of the year.

The Whitecaps continue their final road trip of the year with the second game of a three-game series against the Fort Wayne TinCaps at 7:05 p.m. on Thursday night. RHP Tommy Collier (9-7, 2.66) is scheduled to take the hill for West Michigan against RHP Matt Wisler (5-4, 2.45) of Fort Wayne. Just three home games remain the regular season, with the 'Caps kicking off their season-ending three-game series at Fifth Third Ballpark on Saturday, September 1, at 7:00 p.m. Fireworks will follow the ballgame. Group and individual tickets can be reserved by calling the Whitecaps front office at 616-784-4131 or visiting www.whitecapsbaseball.com.

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