

Player shortage ends CG-B baseball season

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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Injury to one of nine members on shorthanded team leaves Rockets without enough manpower to continue

The Cedar Grove-Belgium Rockets have played their final baseball game this summer.

Although the team started the season with 14 players in May, the number dwindled as several members quit in recent weeks.

When an injury during a home game last week left the Rockets with only eight players — and no prospect of fielding a full lineup — they had no choice but to forfeit the rest of the season, head coach Mike Johnson said Monday.

“It’s really unfortunate for the players who wanted to continue, but we can’t keep going this way,” said Johnson, who guided the Rockets to a 4-7 overall record through June 28.

“I feel really bad. The players we had did their best, and the coaches did their best.”

Johnson said the team had several reserves until late June. However, when more team members quit following a 7-2 loss at Howards Grove, the Rockets were down to nine players.

During the third inning of a 2-1 win over Oostburg on June 28, freshman Christian O’Donnell was hurt when he stepped on the foot of the Oostburg first baseman.

Johnson said O’Donnell’s injury was eventually diagnosed as a broken foot, sidelining him for at least six weeks — and effectively ending the year for the Rockets.

Ironically, the Central Lakeshore Conference game was also one of the high points of the season for Cedar Grove-Belgium, which got a no-hitter from sophomore pitcher Josh Ruppel.

After O’Donnell’s injury, the Rockets continued the game with eight players and hung on for a win that gave them a 4-6 conference record.

Under WIAA rules, teams are allowed to compete with fewer than nine players but must have that many to start a game.

Johnson said he conferred with athletic director Dan Coopman, who contacted the WIAA about the shortage of players. With regional tournaments scheduled to begin July 16, WIAA officials asked the school to make a decision on the team’s future as soon as possible.

With no prospect of adding players, the outcome was clear, Johnson said.

“It’s extremely tough to make a decision like this, but we had no alternative,” he said.

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The Rockets began the season with only two seniors on their roster, which was made of primarily of sophomores and freshmen.

Starting with a June 30 game against Elkhart Lake, Cedar Grove-Belgium will forfeit its final six regular-season games.

Johnson, who was in his fourth season as the Rockets' head coach, said he is unsure about the baseball program's future or if he would return next year.

Coopman could not be reached for comment.