

The Greatest Win On Canadian Soil

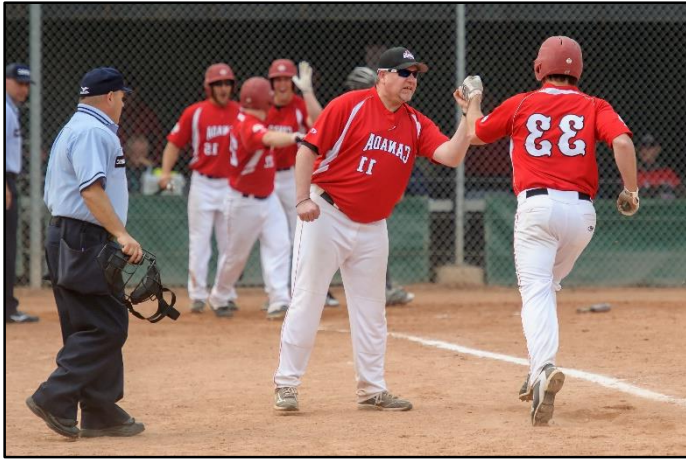


Sunday, July 5, 2015 was quite a day for Canadian Men's Softball. A brilliant performance by Team Canada saw them score 20 runs against the two best teams in the world ending what many believed was a playoff jinx. No longer will they be known as merely the preliminary round team, as the team that dies in the playoffs. After charging out with hot preliminary rounds to only cool off the playoffs in the previous 2 world championship and the Pan AM qualifier, it seemed a pattern had developed. However, hot bats all around, including two players from Newfoundland in particular, who had an unbelievable day at the plate to lead Canada to its first Gold medal at the event since 1992; Brad Ezekiel had two homeruns, a triple and seven runs batted in and Steve Mullaley connected for four homeruns and drove in nine runs in the two games.

Canada enjoyed an undefeated preliminary round that saw them beat power houses Argentina and the defending champion from New Zealand. Their first playoff game got rid of some demons as they beat the 2011 World Champions and world number one ranked pitcher Adam Folkard from Australia 8-3. However, the doubts started to creep in after a disappointing 9-5 loss to the Kiwi's on Saturday night forcing them to take a longer route to the championship.

Sunday began with many fans dealing with the doubts as a result of the night before and hoping Canada had enough left to win 2 huge games against the two best teams in the world, Venezuela and New Zealand. In the first game many Canadians were relieved to find out that Venezuela was going in without ace Ramon Jones who had not given up a run in 3 playoff games and allowed only 3 hits. The fears of many of the fans were quickly eased as the Canuck hitters exploded, led by 5 RBI's from Brad Ezekiel. This combined with shutout pitching from Sean Cleary, gave Canada an easy 10-0 win in 4 innings.

The final game was something legends are made of. The two countries that had won more world championship medals than any of the others, faced off in front of a packed stadium that hosted more world championships than any other diamond in Canada. Many local fans could still remember 2009, the last time the worlds were in Saskatoon, when the Kiwis eliminated Canada forcing them to accept a bronze medal at home and thus ensuring Canada had never won a gold medal on home soil.



Team Canada Head Coach John Stuart, put Sean Cleary back in the circle for Canada for the final. However much like the night before, he struggled early, pitching two innings and a third, yielding five runs on four hits and three walks while striking out two. In the top of the third inning a quiet and nervous crowd changed to rabid enthusiasm when “the local boy”, 24-year-old Devon McCullough, replaced Cleary with Canada down 4-0 and a runner on second base. McCullough did enough that inning to get Canada to the bats, but after allowing the runner to score from second, his team was down 5-0 to the defending champs. With the crowd back in the game one could sense a slight change of momentum. That change became obvious when Canada scored 4 runs in the bottom of the third thanks to a 3 run homer by Ezekiel and a solo shot by Steve Mullaley.

After a disastrous start that saw Canada replace it's ace with the youngest player on the team, Canada was down just one run and slowly the doubts had turned to optimism. In the bottom of the fourth inning, Mullaley changed that feeling to pure confidence as he hit a bomb to straight away center field that had brought in 3 runners as a result of Nik Hayes walk, to give the home team an 8-5 lead. Topping off an incredible 3 for 4 performance including 3

homeruns and 7 RBI, Steve Mullaley hit his third of the game in the bottom of the sixth to give Canada a commanding lead.

No one was completely at ease, even with a 10-5 lead, as New Zealand was the team everyone though had the most powerful hitting team in the world coming into this championship. Nonetheless, Devon McCullough, who grew up just blocks away from Bob Van Impe Stadium, was too much for the Kiwis on that day, as he earned the win with an incredible performance, allowing only a hit and four walks while sitting down eight batters on strikes in four innings and two thirds of relief. The bottom of seventh was truly a “story book ending” as over 6000 fans chanted McCullough’s name in the hope of spurring him on to victory. He finished it off in style striking out Stephen Ratu, swinging on his most famous pitch, his changeup to end the game.

The win was the greatest ever on Canadian soil for a number of reasons. This win ended a long gold medal drought. Canada has long been a men’s softball powerhouse, but it had been 23 years since they last won the world championship in the Philippines in 1992. Many softball observers ranked Steve Mullaley’s 3 homerun and 7 RBI performance in the final, right up there with New Zealand’s Michael White’s perfect game as the best individual performance in World Championship final history. Saskatoon’s Bob Van Impe Stadium had hosted two previous men’s world championship and one ladies but never saw Canada in the final. Few Canadian fans had witnessed in person a gold medal victory. However, in Saskatoon 6,348 saw the final game and almost 54,000 witnessed Canada’s championship during the event.

