

Mack takes 2A title

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SANTA ROSA -- A sense of apprehension was growing in the McKinleyville dugout and among the fans.

Senior pitcher Tom Jaso had entered the seventh inning with a five run lead, but it had been whittled to two, and Healdsburg had the tying run on base.

In came Nick Rasines, charged with the task of preserving a 9-7 lead.

After walking Nolan Rege to load the bases with one out, Rasines induced Brian Bush to fly out to center. Cory Harms broke for home, but changed his mind upon seeing center fielder Bailey Mason's strong throw home.

Rasines then put the hammer down, striking out the Greyhounds' Rigo Jacinto on three pitches to end the game.

"I wasn't hitting my spots," Jaso said. "(Rasines) did a great job coming in. He did what he had to do."

With the win, McKinleyville wrapped up its first NCS title since 1995.

"It's a great win for the program," said Panther head coach Dustin Dutra. "It's a great win for a wonderful group of kids that I've had the privilege of coaching all year long."

The Panthers had taken a 9-4 lead into the bottom of the seventh, but Jaso -- who had struggled some with his command, hitting four batters in the game -- allowed consecutive singles and a walk to start the inning.

After a fielder's choice plated the Greyhounds' first run of the inning, Jaso fell behind Harms 3-0. Rasines came over from his shortstop position to try to calm his teammate down.

But Jaso lost Harms, then gave up a two-run single to Brooks Gerstley, closing the gap to 9-7.

Dutra badly wanted to leave Jaso in to finish what he started, but he couldn't wait any longer, and turned the ball over to Rasines.

"He'd thrown a lot of pitches," Dutra said of Jaso. "He's been so gutsy all year. I wanted to let him finish. Unfortunately, it got tight in the end, so I had to bring Nick (Rasines) in."

It was fitting, in a way, that Rasines picked up Jaso to secure the title. The two have led McKinleyville all season, both on the mound and on offense, and it was no different on Saturday as Jaso got the win, Rasines got the save, and each had multi-hit games at the plate.

The Panthers seemed to be breezing their way to the NCS title, having exploded for eight runs in the final three innings after falling behind early.

They did most of their damage in the fifth inning, when they put up a five-spot to erase a 4-1 deficit. The last two batters in the order, Dusty McCollough and Andrew Hanger, started off the inning with a single and a walk, respectively.

Then Rasines, who was 3-for-5 with three runs scored on the day, laid down a perfect hard bunt to the right side that found its way past losing pitcher Mitch Sindle into no man's land, and everyone was safe.

Mason was hit by a pitch, forcing in McCollough, and a passed ball plated Hanger. Jaso tied the game at 4 with an RBI groundout that scored Rasines and advanced Mason to second.

Mason stole third, then scored on a single by Justin Lankila. Lankila scored to make it 6-4 two batters later on a single from Louis Lonon, who had five RBI in the NCS playoffs.

Lonon also contributed in ways that don't appear in the box score.

Before the Panthers' big inning, the momentum had been sliding over to the Healdsburg dugout. The Greyhounds had snuffed out a bases-loaded, no-out McKinleyville threat in the top of fourth -- Jaso was dead at home after a missed suicide squeeze sign for the first out -- and had put up two runs in the bottom of the inning to take a three-run lead.

But Lonon wouldn't let the Panthers' spirits sink. He paced up and down the dugout all game, firing up his teammates with his infectious enthusiasm.

And they responded, putting up eight unanswered runs before Healdsburg's rally in the seventh.

"They never quit, they never say die." Dutra said of his team. "We got down 4-1 in this game, and they showed some resiliency to come back. We could have gotten down, but we didn't. It's something we've done well the second half of the season."

McKinleyville finished the year winning nine of its last 10 games after starting the season 7-8.

"The way the season started off, to even think that we'd be at this point, it's just remarkable," Dutra said.

Jaso said that the low point of the year may have been April 20, when he and the Panthers lost 7-1 to this same Healdsburg team.

"That was our rock bottom moment," he said.

But they came together down the stretch, never folding in the face of adversity. Not when Arcata battled back to tie the game after trailing 6-1 in the semifinals. Not when Healdsburg put the tying run on with one out in the seventh on Saturday.

"All the credit, all the recognition needs to go to the players on this team," Dutra said. "I've been very fortunate to have the opportunity to coach them."