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By EARL WATT

- Leader & Times

After a 1-4 road trip where the Bee Jays lost three one-run games and a two-run decision, Liberal will return to the friendly confines of Brent Gould Field tonight to open a three-game series with Wellington.

The Bee Jays have not faced Wellington yet, and both are tied with 5-7 Jayhawk League records.

The Bee Jays have been able to split with the league-leading Hays Larks in the first four games between the two teams, and the Bee Jays have knocked off the Dodge City A's in both league contests and in a non-league affair.

But it has been two teams from the east that have pushed the Bee Jays down the league standings.

Derby took two out of three games from the Bee Jays at Brent Gould Field two weeks ago, and Liberal was swept by El Dorado in three one-run games including a 13-inning loss last weekend.

The Bee Jays went to Hays and dropped the first game of a two-game set, but ended the four-game losing streak with a win over the Larks Wednesday.

Starting pitching has been the biggest problem for the Bee Jays.

In the four straight losses, the Bee Jays fell behind early, and the bullpen had to stop the damage. They did, but the hill was too high to climb, and the Bee Jays couldn't rally to wins.

When the Bee Jays have not trailed in the first three innings, they have been able to get wins.

In two of the four losses, the Bee Jays rallied back to tie the games, but El Dorado was able to get a win in the 13th inning and in the bottom of the ninth.

Those close games were something the Bee Jays were able to win a year ago.

Every league game is critical this season with the new format of the NBC World Series.

Only the top three teams from the Jayhawk League will qualify, and Hays has shot out to a strong lead in the first third of the season.

The Larks have a five-game lead over the Bee Jays who currently sit in a tie for fourth place in the Jayhawk League.

The Bee Jays are one game away from third and two games out of second.

The tournament format has a two-week structure with 16 teams playing in Week 1 to try to earn two slots to advance to the 16-team Championship Week.

The first-place Jayhawk League team gets an automatic bid to Championship Week.

The second and third-place teams will have to play in Week 1 and try to earn a spot in Championship Week.

Last year, five Jayhawk League teams qualified for the top 10 at the 32-team national tournament.

But the new structure will likely not allow a fourth or fifth team from the same league.

In a way, the regular season is now an extension of the national tournament, and a top-three finish is mandatory.

That makes this weekend's series with Wellington crucial.

If the Bee Jays struggle with Wellington, they could drop to fifth.

If they can win the series with Wellington, the Bee Jays will at least maintain fourth and have a chance to catch Derby.

The Twins are facing Hays in a weekend series, and both teams are sitting ahead of the Bee Jays in the league standings. If Hays continues to dominate, they will extend their league lead and push Derby away from the top three.

Dodge City and El Dorado are also squaring off in a three-game weekend series. If Dodge City can turn their season around, they could help the Bee Jays. If not, they could solidify their position at second, making it more difficult for Derby, Liberal and Wellington to overcome their early-season struggles.

In an effort to shore up the starting pitching, Liberal manager Brandon Kitch has made some adjustments to his pitching rotation.

Chad Nack, a solid returner from a year ago, is expected to take the mound tonight.

If the Bee Jays can get solid starting pitching, they have shown that they are strong finishers. The bullpen has been stellar in the first third of the league season, and the Bee Jay offense tends to come alive in the second half of the game as well.

While the Bee Jays have not had the start they expected, Kitch believes he has the talent to rally.

“We can pitch, we can field and we can hit,” he said.

Wellington has a history of doing the same, and the key clash between the two will be critical for both clubs seeking to stay in the race for the top three positions.

All three games begin at 7 p.m. and are free, courtesy Koochel's Inc./Tanit Friday, Scantlin's Furniture and Carpet Saturday, and Windtree Management Sunday.

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