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By EARL WATT AND JEREMIAH WILSON

- Leader & Times

The Liberal Bee Jays are in the NBC World Series. Liberal earned an at-large bid to “The First Week” of the tournament, which will begin Friday in Wichita.

The Bee Jays first round game will be at 4 p.m. Saturday against the San Diego Force. Liberal will play it’s second game Sunday.

The set-up of the tournament will force the Bee Jays to win a minimum of five games over the course of a week if they hope to have a shot at a national championship. “The First Week” bracket is a double-elimination bracket, so should they falter, they will still have a shot at qualifying for “Championship Week.”

The series win against the El Dorado Broncos may have improved Liberal’s chances of receiving an invitation. After losing a heart-breaking game Friday, Liberal came back strong to pick up a pair of victories on Saturday and Sunday.

The bid to the NBC World Series is the 56th received and the 55th time the Bee Jays will participate since the team was founded in 1955.

Liberal is one of the most successful teams in the history of the tournament with five national championships and seven runner-up finishes.

“This is a good thing,” Liberal manager Brandon Kitch said. “I think this team has a shot at making a deep run.”

Liberal will take a team that is much more cohesive as a unit compared to the team that took the field in early June. Perhaps even more so than the team that took the field prior to their home game on the Fourth of July.

“I think this team is set up for a good tournament run,” Kitch said. “It comes down to good quality starts on the mound and getting hot at the right time.”

All season long the Bee Jays have had to make adjustments to the roster because of injuries and player departures. The team that takes the field tonight against Dodge City hardly resembles the team that took the field to open the season. The influx of new talent that was needed due to those injuries has turned their season around.

“Everyone doubted us all season long,” Kitch said. “Now that we are in I don’t think there is any doubt we can make a serious run at this thing.”

When most teams would struggle to make those type of adjustments work, The Bee Jays have gelled seamlessly and improved with every series they play.

“The new guys here have come in and helped us out a lot,” Liberal manager Brandon Kitch said.

Recently the Liberal pitching staff has been run ragged due to being so short handed due to

injuries. That will be the most pressing issue the Bee Jays will need to address heading into the tournament.

“We’ve got four guys that are going to come in and help us out,” Kitch said. “Hopefully we can pick up a couple guys from Derby if they don’t get into the tournament.”

Now that the Bee Jays have received the invitation, they can move forward with those roster adjustments, something that happens for all qualifiers each year.

But players on teams that don’t have a chance of qualifying won’t commit to teams that may not receive a bid.

Now that the Bee jays are in, shoring up critical positions can take place, but the clock is still ticking. The NBC World Series begins Friday, and many players have already been approached by teams that have finished higher in the standings.

Receiving a bid four days before the start of the tournament doesn’t leave a lot of time to make the adjustments.

But Liberal has been in the same position before. When Mike Hargrove coached the Bee Jays in 2008, the bid came in late, and the Bee Jays finished fourth in the nation. Liberal played defending national champion Havasu Heat in the first game of the tournament, and upset the Heat.

Liberal has not finished lower than top 10 in the nation since.

“I’m happy for the organization, for the town of Liberal and for the community,” Kitch said. “We would like to thank them for their support all summer long.”

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