

By EARL WATT

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WICHITA — The Bee Jays dogpiled relief pitcher Tomas Cruz on the pitchers mound when the final pop fly was caught in center field, and the Bee Jays had won their fifth national championship.

Liberal had to avenge an earlier loss to the Seattle Studs in the 104-degree heat, and the Bee Jays were able to jump out to an early lead and hold on late for a 9-6 win.

Joe Vaskas turned in a four-for-five performance including a home run that scored two runs and he later scored another run in the third.

The Bee Jays built a 6-0 lead in the third inning, but the Studs hit a two-run home run in the fourth followed by a grand slam to tie the game 6-6.

But the Bee Jays regained the lead in the fifth after Vaskas led off with a double and scored on an error by the Studs second baseman.

Liberal added two insurance runs in the sixth when Kelby Tomlinson scored on another Stud error and Vaskas hit a single to score Blake Bergeron for a 9-6 lead.

Tomas Cruz came out of the pen to make the lead stick, and the celebration began.

“This team has been great all year at doing their jobs,” Vaskas said. “That takes the pressure off and makes the game easier for everyone.”

When the Studs fired back with six runs in the fourth, the Bee Jays continued to play their style of baseball, which included an uncanny ability to respond to adversity.

“Every time we faced pressure, we handled it,” Bee Jay manager John Martin said. “We never backed down. I told the guys it was like a cage fight. When you get punched, you have to go back at them. We found a way.”

Just two nights earlier, Liberal lost its only game to the Studs in a 5-0 shutout.

But it was a different Bee Jay team in the title tilt.

Liberal scored three in the first inning, and the momentum carried throughout the night.

“I know we had a good team,” Bee Jay General Manager Bob Carlile said. “The Studs beat us the other night when we were dead as a doornail. But we were coming off that barnburner the night before against Haysville that we won 11-10. We came back with a run-rule win against Denver last night, and if it wasn’t for that grand slam tonight, this game wouldn’t have been close, either.”

Liberal steadily improved the program over the past three years, finishing fourth in 2008 and third in 2009 before winning the title Friday night.

“When Mike Hargrove came in here two years ago, it was his goal to win,” Carlile said. “It was

the board's goal. This program was in trouble three years ago. But several of us got back on the board and found some more to get on the board. This is one fo the best board I have worked with. They got out there, sold ads, worked at the games. They did a great job. It was a fantastic board."

Liberal won the national championship in 1968, 1979, 1985, 2000 and now in 2010.

And they did it the way they have responded all year, by facing adversity and responding with a timely hit, a key home run, a big defensive play, whatever was needed to swing the tide of momentum back to the Bee Jays.

"We didn't come out ready the other night," first baseman Blake Bergeron said. "Tonight everyone stepped up. Vaskas stepped up, and the offense helped out. We never give up. We had to come back. It's a good thing we did. It was a hell of a ball game."