



# 2023 SEASON RECAP



After a blistering start and a wobbly mid to late season, the Big Train players got hot at exactly the right time to claim a tenth Ripken League championship.

Coming off a heartbreaking loss to the Alexandria Aces in the 2022 Cal Ripken St. League Collegiate Baseball League (CRSCBL) championship finals, the Bethesda Big Train looked to bounce back in 2023 and retake its place at the top of the league. The Big Train did well during the regular season, finishing 23-13 and capturing the CRSCBL North Division title by edging out a competitive Cropdusters team. But Bethesda only earned the #2 seed in the league playoffs, again finding themselves behind their old foes, the #1 Alexandria Aces that were fresh off an impressive 30-6 regular season. Fortunately, the talented Big Train roster got hot at the perfect time, rising to the occasion and sweeping the Aces in the championship series to earn the Big Train's tenth league championship.



## Regular Season

The Bethesda Big Train started its 2023 campaign off triumphantly with a 10-5 win against Cropdusters Baseball. In the first game of the season, Bethesda saw solid offensive performances from players up and down the lineup. **John Long (North Carolina)** went 2 for 4 and drove in a run. **Chris Hacopian (Maryland)** went 2 for 5 and scored two runs. **Zeb Ruddell (LSU)** went 2 for 4 and drove in two runs. Three pitchers, **Patrick Galle (Ole Miss)**, **Gavin Jones (Alabama)** and **Jack Hostetler (Whitman College)**, combined to allow only two earned runs. The gritty win foreshadowed Big Train's pitching, which would continue to dominate, and the fierce rivalry that formed between Bethesda and the Cropdusters.

In the early part of the season, the Green and White also showed that they could be an offensive force. On June 4<sup>th</sup>, Bethesda walloped the Silver Spring-Takoma Thunderbolts, 21-2. In the blowout, **Jeffery Heard (Sacramento State)** hit his first home run of the season and drove in five runs. Heard would go on to hit a team leading five home runs during the summer, which was good enough to tie for second place in the Ripken League home run leaderboards. **Casey Bishop (Towson)** clouted in four runs in that game.

The Big Train scored a lopsided win over the Thunderbolts on June 10<sup>th</sup>. The score was 12-0. **Ryan Ertlschweiger (James**

**Madison)** was a lights-out starter as he pitched a no-hitter for four innings and struck out six. **Davion Hickson (Florida State)** hurled the remaining three shutout innings and gave up only one hit. **Teddy Ruffner (UNC Wilmington)** went 3 for 4 and scored two runs. Continuing with dominance, the Big Train beat the DC Grays, 15-2, the next day. Jeffery Heard was perfect at bat, going 4 for 4, including a home run. **Lucas Phelps (Florida Atlantic)** was 3 for 4 with two RBI. **Brandon Clarke (Alabama)** and **Evan Marcinko (UNC Wilmington)** each pitched two innings of no-hit shutout ball.

On June 12, four Big Train pitchers combined to hurl a two-hit nine-inning shutout over the Southern Maryland Senators. The four moundsmen were **Jesse Gutierrez (San Diego State)**, **Ryan Kennedy (Virginia Tech)**, **Jack Robinson (Roanoke)** and **Max Martzolf (Florida Atlantic)**. Bethesda won, 7-0.

Bethesda picked up another massive win on June 13 against the Gaithersburg Giants. The Big Train crushed the Giants, 26-0. The victory was historic, because the Big Train scored the most runs they had ever scored at Shirley Povich Field and had the largest margin of victory in team history. In the thrashing, **Dixon Williams (East Carolina)** had seven RBI, **Jacob Orr (Maryland)** drove in six and **Dean Toigo (Cypress College)** hit the first of his three home runs in the season, while driving in six.

While the offense was the headliner in the game, the pitching, led by **Brandon Cassedy (Christopher Newport)**, also shone. In three shutout innings, Cassedy struck out five batters. Dominant pitching was common for Cassedy throughout the summer. Cassedy led the Ripken League with a microscopic ERA of 0.64. Cassedy's ERA mark is the lowest posted by a Ripken League pitcher since Bethesda pitcher Ty Madrigal recorded a 0.55 ERA in 2017.

**Carter Cunningham (East Carolina)** made his Big Train debut on June 14, and he immediately made his presence known. Against the South County Braves, he went 2 for 5, drove in three runs, and smashed a home run. Among the Big Train pitchers, **Joe Bladel (Maryland)** gave the most impressive performance, hurling one-hit shutout ball over three innings.

On June 15, the Big Train claimed an important victory over the Alexandria Aces, one of only six games the Aces lost during the regular season. Bethesda delivered a solid team effort to snag the 5-0 win on the road. The starting pitcher Patrick Galle and relievers Davion Hickson and Evan Marcinko combined for 17 strikeouts against talented Alexandria bats.

Mother Nature interfered the following week, as a slew of rainouts provided the Green and White with five straight days off. The team came back to action in a June 25<sup>th</sup> home doubleheader against the Gaithersburg Giants, which they split. The Big Train found it impossible to sweep doubleheaders in 2023. Out of the six doubleheaders they played, Bethesda split five and was the one being swept in the sixth.



*For the third year in a row, the Bethesda Big Train and the Alexandria Aces would be the final two teams left to battle for the CRSCBL championship trophy.*



The team traveled to Waldorf, MD, on June 28<sup>th</sup> for its sole road game at the Southern Maryland Senators' Regency Furniture Stadium. The lack of home field advantage wasn't a factor as the Big Train edged out the Senators, 5-3, in Coach Sal Colangelo's 500<sup>th</sup> regular season win with the team. It was an exciting night for Coach Sal and the entire Big Train organization, which the players celebrated by sneaking up on their coach for multiple well-earned Gatorade baths.

On June 29, three Big Train pitchers combined to hurl a nine-inning shutout over the DC Grays. The Bethesda bats were rather quiet, except for the fourth inning, when they scored five runs, which represented their total for the game. The dominant hurlers were Brendan Cassidy, **Griffin Stieg (Virginia Tech)** and **Darin Kuskie (South Carolina Upstate)**.

During the first week of July, the team, along with player families, coaches, staff and dedicated Big Train fans, traveled to New York and New England for two exhibition games and a baseball-themed tour of the region. Unfortunately, Bethesda's first scheduled exhibition game against the Newport, RI, Gulls of the New England Collegiate Baseball League (NECBL) was cancelled due to rain on the Fourth of July. But the Green and White were able to face off against the NECBL's Martha's Vineyard Sharks the next day, losing 6-4. Coach Colangelo used the exhibition opportunity to play 21 different players, including eight pitchers. Down 5-0 in the seventh, the Big Train staged

an exciting rally for their faithful fans, but couldn't pull out the victory.

The second half of the season was not as smooth as the first half. In the fifteen games remaining after the team's trip to Martha's Vineyard, the Big Train went 8-7. During this stretch, the Big Train played five doubleheaders in just eleven days.

On July 6, the Big Train edged the Southern Maryland Senators 5-3. **Skyler Hutto (Alabama)** was credited with the win. **Lucas Phelps (Florida Atlantic)** went 2 for 4 and drove in a run. **Eddie Hacopian (Maryland)**, son of original Big Train head coach Derek Hacopian, made his Big Train debut in the July 12 game. Placed at the leadoff spot in the batting order, Eddie responded with two hits, two walks, and three runs scored as his team romped to a 13-3 win over the Gaithersburg Giants. Continuing with Big Train lineage, **Aden Ritenour (Shepherd)**, son of Coach Jason Ritenour who was with us from 2012 through 2016, made his debut in this game. He surrendered one run in the one inning he pitched. On July 16, the Big Train was feeling its oats against the South County Braves, coming away with a 13-3 victory. **Connor Rasmussen (East Carolina)** was the big hitter, going 3 for 4. **Nick DiLisi (another East Carolina product)** had a nice game, going 2 for 4. **Kevin Scully (James Madison)** pitched a hitless and runless inning.

With Bethesda scuffling, the Cropdusters made a run at the Ripken League North Division title. Salvaging the second game of the doubleheader against the Cropdusters on July 17 was important. Bethesda prevailed in that one, 6-3. **Clay Wargo (Louisiana-Lafayette)** drove in two runs. The race between the Big Train and Cropdusters came down to the wire. But then Bethesda captured an 11-8 victory over the Takoma-Silver Spring Thunderbolts on July 19 in the penultimate game of the regular season. The hero of that game was Dean Toigo, who hit two home runs and drove in five. He was supplemented by Connor Rasmussen, who drove in three. With

## 2023 Final Regular Season CRSCBL Standings

	W-L	%	GB
<b>NORTH DIVISION</b>			
Bethesda Big Train	23-13	.639	0
Cropdusters Baseball	22-14	.611	1
SS-Takoma Thunderbolts	14-22	.389	9
Gaithersburg Giants	12-24	.333	11
<b>SOUTH DIVISION</b>			
Alexandria Aces	30-6	.833	0
Metro South County Braves	15-21	.417	15
Southern MD Senators	14-22	.389	16
DC Grays	14-22	.389	16

## 2023 Montgomery Cup Standings

	W	L	%
Cropdusters Baseball	13	5	.722
Bethesda Big Train	11	7	.611
SS-Takoma Thunderbolts	6	12	.333
Gaithersburg Giants	6	12	.333

## Sal Colangelo's 2023 Big Train Manager's Awards

**Most Valuable Player**  
Dixon Williams (East Carolina)

**Offensive Player of the Year**  
Jeffery Heard (Oregon)

**Pitcher of the Year**  
Brandon Cassidy (Christopher Newport)

**Relief Pitcher of the Year**  
Max Martzolf (Florida Atlantic)



**CRSCBL Most Outstanding Pitcher:**  
Brandon Cassidy (Christopher Newport)

**CRSCBL League Championship Series  
Most Outstanding Player**  
Jason Schiavone (James Madison)

**CRSCBL First Team All League**  
2B Dixon Williams (East Carolina)  
OF Jeffery Heard (Oregon)  
SP Brandon Cassidy (Christopher Newport)  
RP Max Martzolf (Florida Atlantic)





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that victory, the Big Train earned its spot as North Division champions. In the final regular season game, the Big Train shut out the Alexandria Aces, 6-0, in a seven inning game, using five pitchers to accomplish the feat. Aden Ritenour got the win with two innings of shutout hurling. The season ended with the Big Train's winning the North Division by one game.

## League Semifinals

After earning a bye in the first round of the playoffs, Bethesda faced off against a familiar opponent in the League Semifinals: the Cropdusters. After the two teams battled for the North Division title, they now would go into a three game series to determine which one could advance to the League Championship finals.

The first game was a thriller. Brendan Cassedy took the mound for the Big Train, tossing seven dominant innings while allowing only two runs. Despite Cassedy's efforts, the Cropdusters' arms were more effective, and in the bottom of the ninth, Bethesda trailed 3-1. But with two outs in the last inning, Jeffery Heard smashed a two run home run to right field to tie the game at three. After launching Bethesda's biggest hit of the season, Heard flipped his bat into the air and celebrated with his teammates as he crossed home plate. After Big Train ace reliever Max Martzolf tossed three scoreless innings out of the bullpen, Casey Bishop hit a dribbler with the bases loaded that drove in the game winning run and gave Bethesda a key 4-3 game one victory in the 12<sup>th</sup> inning.

In the second game of the series, Bethesda was not as fortunate. The Cropdusters won game two, 5-3, to even the series. **Dixon Williams (East Carolina)** hit a home run in the contest, but the Green and White could not catch up. The series and a spot in the League Championship Series was going to come down to a winner-take-all third game.

In the do-or-die game, the Cropdusters took a 5-0 lead in the first inning. However, the resilient Big Train batters stormed back, tying the game in the third inning and taking a commanding lead in the sixth. At game's end, Bethesda had beaten the Cropdusters, 15-7, to move on to the League Championship Series. **Dixon Williams** had a spectacular game for the Big Train, knocking five hits, driving in seven runs, hitting a home run and stealing home.

## League Championship Series

For the third year in a row, the Bethesda Big Train and the Alexandria Aces would be the final two teams left to battle for the CRSCBL championship trophy. Alexandria entered the final series as the #1 overall seed, boasting a 30-6 regular season record and sweeping the Silver Spring-Takoma Thunderbolts in the semifinals. Bethesda came into the final series as the #2 seed.

Alexandria hosted game one at Frank Mann Field on July 26. What was expected to be a low scoring pitcher's duel quickly turned into an offensive explosion and one of the most exciting games of the summer. **Dixon Williams** kicked things off with a leadoff walk before the second batter, **Dean Toigo**, blasted a two-run home run. Bethesda scored three more runs in the first inning



on a **Jason Schiavone (James Madison)** home run, putting the Aces on the defensive for one of the few times in 2023. But Alexandria clawed back to take a 6-5 lead in the second inning. It was clear that the Big Train would need more offense in this game, and its offense indeed came through. By the end of the fourth inning, it was Big Train 12, Aces 7. When eight innings of play had concluded, the Big Train led 16-10, which turned out to be the final score. Jason Schiavone had blasted three home runs and had driven in eight runs. **Dean Toigo** had driven in another four. **Austin Morris (Alabama)** mopped up by pitching one-hit ball for the final four innings. Despite Morris' great performance, things got a bit dicey in the ninth. Thanks to a walk, a single, and a hit by pitch, the Aces managed to load the bases with two outs in the ninth. Morris got to a 3-1 count on the next batter, but induced a fly ball that was caught by left fielder Jacob Orr for the final out.

The teams met at Shirley Povich Field on July 27 for game two. Coach Colangelo selected Jack Hostetler for the mound in this critical game, hoping for a win at home rather than needing to return to Alexandria's own field for a third game. A sacrifice fly by Alexandria brought in an early run, but Bethesda responded quickly. Jason Schiavone barely missed his fourth home run of the series as he sent a double to the center field wall. He advanced to third on a passed ball and then scored on a wild pitch to tie the game at one. After each starter had yielded a single run, both Hostetler and the Aces' Ryan Edwards pitched extremely well over the next few innings. Hostetler delivered his best start of the season. He struck out five and allowed only one run, putting his team in a favorable position to win. In the sixth inning, Casey Bishop used an Aces defensive mishap to score **Jack Guerrero (UNC Wilmington)** and Jason Schiavone with a soft grounder. Zeb Ruddell followed by smashing a ball off the center fielder's glove, which enabled Casey Bishop to score, upping Bethesda's lead to 4-1. The Big Train tacked on three insurance runs in the seventh, making the score 7-1. The Aces were able to score two runs against Big Train reliever Max Martzolf, but he was still able to rack up the final eight outs to secure Bethesda's tenth league championship. The players stormed the field, poured many Gatorade baths on coaches' heads, and posed for pictures with the championship trophy. It was a jubilant end to an exciting 2023 season.