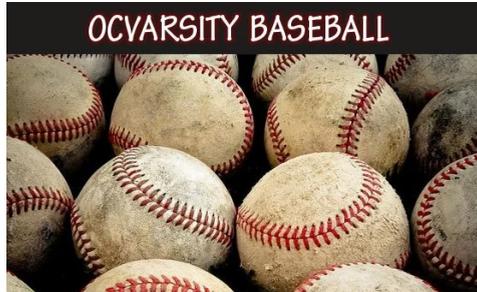


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By **ZACH CAVANAGH** |

May 11, 2017 at 8:53 pm

NEWPORT BEACH >> Coming into the week, Sage Hill was the ruler of the Academy League. The Lightning had won 33 straight league games and back-to-back league titles.

Before that stretch, the Academy League had belonged to Crean Lutheran with its own set of back-to-back league titles. The Saints broke Sage Hill's streak and reclaimed part of the crown on Tuesday and took it all for their own on Thursday.

Crean Lutheran tore up the base paths for an early four-run lead and held on late to beat Sage Hill, 4-3, and claim the outright Academy League title in the regular-season finale Thursday at Sage Hill High.

"It was huge, especially knowing they got us three times last year," Crean Lutheran senior Gavin Folsom said. "Everything we've prepared to do has come down to win league here."

Beyond the two league meetings last season, Sage Hill (21-4-2, 10-2) also beat Crean Lutheran (22-4, 12-0) in the CIF-SS Division 6 championship game. Both schools made the jump to Division 3 this season and will face a whole new challenge in the playoffs, which start next week.

"Obviously, the bracket is deeper," Crean Lutheran coach Jake Haney said. "I think CIF is going to accomplish what they wanted to where you're not going to have those first-round blowouts."

Crean Lutheran looked to establish its claim to the outright league title early with its running game.

George Erwin led off the game with a walk, stole second and moved to third on a wild pitch. Folsom knocked him in with a single and also stole second.

In the second inning, Sean Horn earned a leadoff walk and stole second. Horn scored on a single by Chris Pimental, and Pimental stole second. Derek Wu followed with an infield single, and Folsom doubled home Pimental and Wu for the four-run lead.

"Facing (Ashwin) Chona, we know he can't really pick (off runners)," Folsom said. "We knew when would be a good time to steal and know when wouldn't be."

Chona, who has thrown four no-hitters this season, threw only two innings.

Sage Hill closed the gap in the third inning.

Jack Pelc led off with a triple and scored on an error. Mike Helton hit an RBI single to score Matt King, and Brett Super scored on a bases-loaded walk by Carlos Orozco.

That was all the runs Sage Hill was able to score, as it stranded 11 runners in the game.

Crean Lutheran also couldn't extend its lead as it stranded eight runners.

"It just seemed that every time we got in that situation, either we hit the ball hard or we were at the end of our lineup," Sage Hill coach Dominic Campeau said of the inability to drive in runs. "I was just hoping one of our run producers would find a gap. It's frustrating."