

# Rangers wrap up season in WBA Rib Lake Regional

By Jim Servi

## Setting the Stage

Local rival Rib Lake hosted the playoff tournament and seemed to plan every event in their small town on the same weekend. From the baseball field you could see the fair rides and hear the tractor pulls thunder in the background while 1993 graduates of Rib Lake High School poured into Camp 28 on the other side of the field for their 20 year class reunion. The stage was set for the Wisconsin Baseball Association (WBA) playoffs.

The Merrill Rangers' Saturday opponent was the 2010 WBA champions, Haugen Knights, hailing from northern Barron County. As part of the tournament draw, the Rangers were given home field advantage and sent their ace, Luke Golisch, to the mound to start the game.

## Back and Forth

The Knights brought their bats and busted them out right from the start, knocking in three quick runs on a single, double and sacrifice fly in the first inning.

Down 3-0, the Rangers came to bat with vengeance. Alex Cordova led off with a deep double which was quickly followed by a Brad Kanitz single and a Chase Nelson walk. With the base loaded and nobody out, the Rangers proceeded to clear the bases to get three runs of their own.

Chris Grunenwald started the charge with a deep sacrifice fly to left field that scored Cordova. Kyle Rajek belted a single and knocked in Kanitz. Garrett Pagel was the next to send a runner home, when he scored Nelson on a fielder's choice.

The Rangers were quick to even the score at 3-3 and the game was reset heading into the second inning. After the shaky first inning, Golisch came back with a 1-2-3 inning, striking out two and contributing to some nice defense behind him. With a ball hit sharply in the hole between first and second, Lucas Thiel made an outstanding effort to knock the ball down and conveniently right to Johnny Annis at second who threw on to Golisch covering first for the out.

Unfortunately, the Rangers weren't able to take advantage and the second inning ended with the 3-3 tie.

## Chipping Away

The Knights started the third inning with the top of the order and quickly rattled off four straight hits and two more runs to re-take the lead 5-3.

Not letting the Knights rest for a minute, Nelson led off the bottom of the third



**Merrill Rangers' pitcher Luke Golisch lets another pitch go in Saturday's WBA playoff game in Rib Lake. Golisch was charged with five earned runs in the 9-5 defeat by the Haugen Knights, last year's state champs. Haugen crushed top-seeded Ashland 12-0 the next day to advance out of the regional.**

with a single, then moved to third base on a Rajek hit. With two on and two outs, Thiel hit a clutch single to drive in Nelson and put the Rangers within one run at 5-4.

Golisch blanked them in the fourth inning but the Rangers also came up empty in the bottom of the inning. The Knights added a run in the fifth inning after a double and an inopportune error allowed them to score.

Grunenwald was able to reach in the bottom of the fifth but was left stranded after two long fly balls couldn't find any gaps. The Rangers were now down 6-4 with four innings to play.

The sixth inning started to turn into one that you wouldn't

want to watch, with the Knights loading the bases after the Rangers got two quick outs. With the composure of a true veteran, Golisch was able to strike out arguably their best batter (4-5 on the day with three doubles) and get out of the inning unscathed.

Johnny Annis reached on a single in the bottom of the

inning but was left stranded.

## Final Stretch

The Knights were again blanked in the top of the seventh with another 1-2-3 inning on some beautiful defense by Mike Koppelman at third base.

Down 6-4, the Rangers loaded the bases with two outs on a Nelson walk and singles by Rajek and Pagel, threatening to tie the game with one hit. Regrettably, the Rangers were unable to capitalize.

The Knights exploited the opportunity and added on to their lead with two more unearned runs in the eighth inning before Shawn Schultz entered the game and struck out their number six hitter to end the inning.

It was 8-4 and the Rangers had two more chances to strike. They put two runners on in the eighth on an Annis walk and a Cordova single, but once again came away scoreless.

The players from Haugen added one more run in the ninth making it 9-4 heading into the bottom of the ninth. Just those words "bottom of the ninth" make any baseball player quiver with excitement. Most of us recall the heroics of being young children and re-playing this moment over and over again in the backyard.

The Rangers were hoping  
RANGERS, SEE PAGE 38



## RANGERS, FROM PAGE 34

for some backyard magic as they took the plate. Grunenwald led off with a long double and Rajek worked the count for a walk to give the Rangers hope with two on and nobody out.



Kelly O'Day photo

Above, Rangers' second-baseman John Annis completes a play in the Saturday's WBA playoff game against the Haugen Knights at Rib Lake, while shortstop Chase Nelson backs up the play. At right, Jim Servi appears to slide under the tag by the Haugen infielder while attempting to stretch his RBI single into a double, but is called out to end the game.

The opposing pitcher struck out the next two batters, leaving the Rangers with one last out. Jim Servi entered the game as a pinch hitter and quickly had two strikes against him. With a breaking ball, he took the ball to the opposite field, sending it right down the first base line, scoring Grunenwald, making it 9-5. He rounded first and dug for second but was thrown out on a bang-bang play, ending the game at 9-5.

Five of the nine Haugen runs were earned. Golisch (11 H, 6 W, 5 K, 8 R, 5 ER in 7-2/3 I) took the loss and Schultz (2 H, 2 W, 1 K, 1 R, 0 ER in 1-1/3 I) relieved.

Merrill knocked out 11 hits, led by Rajek (3-4), Grunenwald (2-4, 2B), Cordova (2-5, 2B) and Nelson (1-3, 2 W, 2 R).

### Wrapping Up

Although it's inevitable that the baseball season will come to an end every year, it's still always hard to see the last game finish up. Not only does it signal that the end of summer is near, but that feeling that you get when you walk on the field before a game has to wait for another year.

The anticipation, the excitement and the pure enjoyment is all put on hold. But most of all, it means that you have to wait another year to be with the team.

That's where the memories are created and what really keeps the team coming back. We'll eventually be able to laugh at all the blunders we made, but we'll never forget the little things that bonded us as a baseball team. For a few moments every summer, we are the Merrill Rangers and we can always be proud of that, no matter where life takes us.



Kelly O'Day photo