

SOFTBALL

Saved by Bel, Railroaders oust Lions

Sophomore's second HR of game is walk-off as Brunswick enjoys sudden power surge

■ **1A North:** Brunswick 7, Liberty 5

By **JOHN CANNON**

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BRUNSWICK — Playing with newfound confidence over the past month, Brunswick softball players like sophomore Juliette Bel are beginning to feel like there's nothing they can't do.

A win over perennial power Walkersville? Sure. A surprisingly close loss against juggernaut Catoc-tin? Why not?

How about slugging a few pivotal homers to start off the postseason after managing just one home run during the entire regular season? The Railroaders performed that unlikely task on Thursday.

Bel hit the first two homers of her varsity career, including a two-out walk-off in the seventh inning for her second two-run shot of the day, and Taylor Benson hit a three-run home run as the Railroaders continued their late-season surge, albeit in an unprecedented way, with an exciting 7-5 win over visiting Liberty in the Class 1A North Region II quarterfinals.

"The memories keep on rolling," an elated first-year coach Ronnie Stewart told his players during the postgame huddle.

The Railroaders (11-8) advance to Monday's regional semifinal, where they will play top-seeded

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Saved by Bel

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Catoctin on the road. Brunswick enters as the underdog, but a 2-0 loss to the Cougars on April 30 suggests it has the ability to be competitive.

"We've been playing really good softball the last month or so. The girls finally got some confidence," Stewart said. "I think the Catoctin game, it's a loss, but a 2-0 loss to [Cougars ace] Taylor Smith, I think the confidence boost on that particular [performance] is going to be huge for the rest of the season. And I honestly think we've got a chance come Monday if we play ball like we've been playing."

After the game, Bel stood between fellow sophomores Benson and Kassidy Barnhouse, who had just notched her 100th career strikeout and earned the complete-game win, as she talked about Brunswick's most successful season since the pandemic era.

"We're a pretty young team," Bel said. "We have a lot of underclassmen and I think we're just going to go up from here. We're doing good right now. Just imagine what we can do next year

and the year after in the future."

A key to Brunswick's recent success has been steady pitching by Barnhouse and excellent defense. While those two components resurfaced on Thursday, the power surge was the outlier. Coming into the game, Emy Minnick had Brunswick's only homer.

But Bel set the tone early with a game-tying, two-run homer to center in the first, and the left-handed hitter ended things in the same fashion with her walk-off to center.

"I was so happy. I was pumped," she said of the game-winner. "That was right down the middle. That was my sweet spot. I was like, 'Yes!'"

Calling Bel "the real superstar," Benson said, "I thought, 'Heck yeah, Juliette.' I've been waiting for this all season, literally waiting for it all season."

Benson got in on the act in the third inning, belting a three-run shot over the left field fence to give the Railroaders a 5-2 lead. For Benson, it was a bounce-back from her first inning strikeout, where she was victim-

ized by Liberty starter Rylee Safran's off-speed pitches.

"It was just seeing the ball while we were on deck," Benson said. "Waiting on your pitch, watching balls and watching strikes that you don't like, as well."

Meanwhile, Barnhouse was throwing a typically solid game, scattering six hits and striking out four.

"Her change-up is deadly," Bel said. "I'm so proud of her, a hundred strikeouts. That's amazing."

"Amazing [for] your sophomore year," Benson interjected. "I'm ready for 500 your senior year."

While Barnhouse walked in a run in the seventh, she kept her composure to minimize damage after the Lions loaded the bases (including on an intentional walk) with one out. She escaped the jam by inducing a pair of fly outs, the final one coming on third baseman Benson's running catch in foul territory near Brunswick's dugout.

"It was really stressful, but I had to push through," Barnhouse said. "I had my defense behind me."

Bel and Ava Higgins, who doubled, each had two hits.