Cabrillo rides former HMB pitcher to JUCO Super Regional

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Sure the phrase “comeback kids” gets bandied around in baseball circles, but Cabrillo College may be cornering the market on the popular label this season.

Cabrillo advanced to the California Community College Baseball Super Regional Playoffs by downing College of San Mateo last weekend in a three-game Regional Playoff series. The Seahawks had their backs against the wall throughout, first after dropping Game 1, then by quickly falling behind in the first inning of the decisive Game 3.

That’s when Cabrillo manager Bob Kittle called upon former Half Moon Bay pitcher Julian Garcia, and the sophomore responded with the game of his life. The right-hander delivered a marathon relief outing of 7 1/3 innings — his longest pitching appearance ever — to earn the win in Cabrillo’s 6-5 come-from-behind victory.

“No doubt, this game was the best game I’ve ever pitched,” Garcia said. “I was very excited for the coaches to keep me in there to get through those innings. And to be honest, those innings were kind of a blur because of the adrenaline rush I had going through my body. But nevertheless, a very fun game.”

Coming from behind is something Cabrillo has done all season though. The Seahawks recorded seven comeback wins in the regular season. And after starting the year with a lowly 5-15 record, they won 13 of their last 16 regular-season games to eek into the playoffs with the requisite .500 overall record of 18-18.

“We’ve had to fight for our lives the whole season now,” Kittle said.

It was actually Cabrillo’s lone regular-season matchup with CSM that turned around the team’s fortunes. The Seahawks were suffering an abysmal stretch in which they’d lost 13 of 14, including six straight in Coast Conference play.

“It was terrible,” Garcia said. “Before we played San Mateo for the first time in the regular season … I was very down on our team, and our confidence was very down. But we played San Mateo and we beat them, and that was the spark that we needed to get ignited.”

With the win over the Bulldogs on March 21, the Seahawks started a streak of seven straight wins. And with a conference record of 14-10, they ultimately tied Monterey Peninsula for the co-Coast Pacific Conference title.

Garcia has been a workhorse out of the bullpen this season, appearing in 21 games to tie for seventh in the state along with fellow Cabrillo sophomore Mike Murano. However, Garcia shouldered more than twice the workload of his counterpart totaling 59 innings pitched, tabbing a 5-1 record with a 2.29 ERA. For his efforts, Garcia was one of six Seahawks named to the All-Coast Pacific Conference team.

“He’s probably the most valuable player for us as far as pitchers go because he can fulfill so many roles,” Kittle said.

Used predominantly as a reliever since joining the collegiate ranks, Garcia proved an exceptional starting pitcher in three years at Half Moon Bay. He twice paced the Cougars’ pitching staff with seven wins, once as a sophomore and again as a senior. Both times he helped Half Moon Bay to the Central Coast Section playoffs, though the final outing of his high-school career was met with disappointment as he got hammered by Santa Cruz to take the loss in the Division-III semifinal.

Garcia’s win last weekend over CSM was his first playoff appearance since high school. He almost got into a playoff game last year in Cabrillo’s Regional loss to CSM — warming up in the bullpen during the eighth inning of Game 3 — though the Seahawks instead turned to the more experienced Nick Rosetta in what would result in an elimination loss.

So, Garcia had to wait until this year’s rematch with CSM to get back on the postseason winning track. And after falling behind 5-1 in the third inning of the fateful May 4 afternoon at Cabrillo, Garcia’s offense picked him up, scoring three in the bottom of the third, and two more in the decisive sixth.

“This game was special to me because by the time the score was 5-1 the game was out of my hands,” Garcia said. “I really couldn’t do anything to get the score back up. So I just waited for my hitters … and fortunately we came back. I was very surprised, but I knew my team could do that because we’ve done it before. So I had total confidence in their ability.”

Kittle said he was planning on removing Garcia after the fifth inning, feeling his sophomore was running out of gas. However, Garcia cruised through the fifth on just six pitches, so Kittle left him in. Garcia ultimately retired 13 of the last 14 batters he faced, before giving way in the ninth for Murano to save it.

“He found another gear,” Kittle said. “That’s pure competitiveness.”

Cabrillo advances to the Sierra Super Regional, as the No. 8 Seahawks open against No. 2 Sierra today at 11 a.m., beginning double-elimination play in a bracket that also includes No. 4 Fresno and No. 7 Feather River.