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Undefeated South Korea wins third Little League World Series

By Mike Street
Special to The Asian Reporter

Asian teams have long had a strong showing at the Little League World Series, and this year was no exception, but this time a former champion returned to glory. Taiwan and Japan have won 17 and nine championships, respectively, and Japan has represented the international bracket in the past four finals, winning three. South Korea, on the other hand, had won just twice before this year, back in 1984 and 1985, the only two times they've reached the annual tournament held in South Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Continuing that efficient legacy this year, South Korea qualified and then won the series, setting a new tournament record in the process.

Defending champion Japan played well in the opening rounds of the international bracket, defeating Venezuela 1-0 and coming back against Mexico to win 9-5. Their pitching dominated both contests, as Takuma Takahashi struck out 14 against Venezuela, while Joichiro Fujimatsu and Suguru Kanamori combined to whiff 15 in the Mexico game.

The team from Seoul, South Korea proved equally dominant in its first two games. In their opener against the Czech Republic, Seoul won 10-3 and scored in all but the first inning. Like Japan, their pitching was strong: starter Hae Chan Choi held the Czech team hitless in his two innings while reliever Jae Yeong Hwang whiffed eight batters in three innings.

South Korea added offense to the mix, however, banging out 13 hits against the Czechs before adding 13 more in their next game against Puerto Rico. Seoul had to come from behind to win in the second matchup, trailing 1-5 in the fifth before bringing in seven runs through the final two frames while holding Puerto Rico scoreless. Jae Yeong Hwang was the star of that matchup, pitching those final two innings while also driving in two runs.

In addition, Hwang was instrumental in the international semifinal against Japan, a tight game between two very strong teams. Neither team pushed across a run in the first two frames, and then "Little Monster" Hae Chan Choi hit a two-run homer in the third. Japan responded in their half of the inning, knotting the score on a sacrifice fly and a wild pitch.

The teams battled through two more scoreless innings before Hwang gave South Korea the lead again on a solo homer in the sixth. Dong Wan Sin added another



SOUTH KOREAN SWEEP. South Korean Little League players celebrate a solo home run by Sang Hoon Han during the Little League World Series tournament held in South Williamsport, Pennsylvania. The South Korean squad defeated the team from Chicago to win its third title. (AP Photo/Gene J. Puskar)

run on an RBI double later in the inning, and Dong Hyeok Kim held the Japanese team to just a single in the bottom of the sixth, ensuring the win for Seoul.

Saddled with its first loss, Japan found its offensive stroke against Mexico in the elimination bracket, winning 12-1. But the newly energized Japanese team still couldn't overcome a stronger South Korea in the international championship, as Seoul showed off the pitching and hitting that brought them to the Little League World Series.

Hae Chan Choi and Dong Wan Sin combined to drive in five runs on two doubles in the second inning, part of a seven-run inning that Japan could not overcome. Though they scratched out three runs of their own, the team from Tokyo gave up five more runs to South Korea, who won easily, 12-3. Along with Choi and Sin's heroics, Sang Hoon Han and Jun Ha Yoo both homered, while Choi and Yoo combined for two shutout innings, and Jae Yeong Hwang held Japan hitless in his two innings.

The boys from Seoul now faced an American team from Chicago that had won four straight elimination games prior to the final, including a win in the U.S. championship against a Nevada squad that had outscored its opponents 33-5 over its first three games. Undaunted, Chicago came back against Nevada, scoring three runs in the bottom of the fifth inning and hanging on to win 7-5 to advance to the World Series final for the first time since 1983.

Seoul ended Chicago's miracle run in

this year's final, taking an early lead and never relinquishing it. Hae Chan Choi drove in the game's first run with a one-out double in the first inning, and starting pitcher Jae Yeong Hwang surrendered no hits to Chicago through the first two innings.

Hwang was subbed out because he was feeling ill, but Choi replaced him on the hill, giving up just one run over the next three innings while his teammates flexed their offensive muscles. Hwang drove in a run in the third inning, Gyu Heon Kwon added an RBI of his own in the fourth, and Dong Wan Sin crushed a solo homer in the

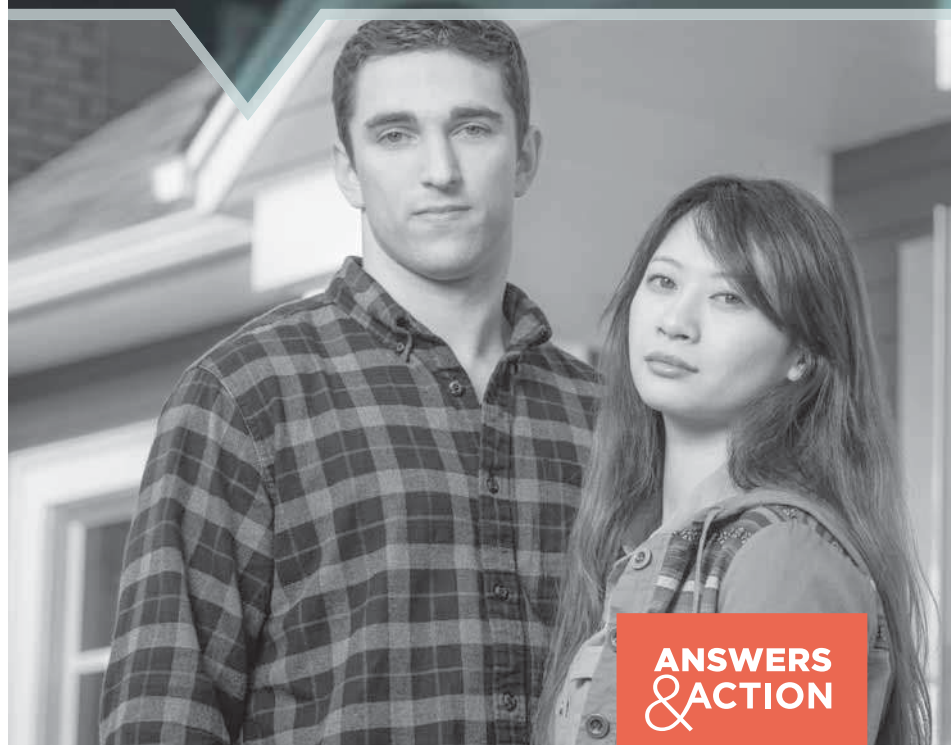
fifth. Sin would finish the tournament as Seoul's leading hitter with a .545 batting average, while Hwang led the team in slugging with three homers and two doubles.

South Korea did not rest on its laurels with a 4-1 lead in the top of the sixth inning, scoring four more runs on a double from third baseman Shane Jaemin Kim and a solo homer from Choi. They needed those insurance runs, as Chicago did not go quietly, scoring three runs before Choi retired the final batter to give his team the victory. Choi and Hwang led South Korea on the mound in the tournament, each winning two games, with Hwang notching a team-best 1.16 Earned Run Average (ERA) and recording the team's only save.

In addition to winning this year's championship, Seoul extended its undefeated run at the Little League World Series with a 11-0 record in three appearances. It also established a new record as the only city Little League team to win three World Series titles. Although it lacks the number of appearances and championships boasted by its Asian rivals Japan and Taiwan, South Korea proved at this year's Little League World Series that quality can be just as important as quantity.

See related story on page 16.

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