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Portsmouth 9-10s seek more of the same

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Portsmouth Little League player Hunter Maurice swings at a pitch in a District II game against Belmont last summer.

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By **Dan Doyon**
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No team has dominated 9- and 10-year-old Little League play recently like Portsmouth, which will begin its quest to repeat as New Hampshire state champions on Monday at Rye — six days after play in District II begins.

Rye kicks things off tonight, when it travels to Laconia. Portsmouth, meanwhile, hopes its schedule is worth the wait.

Portsmouth defeated Somersworth in last year's District II championship series and then upended Salem in three games to win the state title. Four players return from that squad in an effort to win Portsmouth's eighth state championship. It has won every District II crown since 1999.

Kobie Taylor, Josh Saurman, Kyle Griffin and Sam Grattan give Portsmouth some tournament-tested experience that can only help the remaining 10 players who are getting their first taste of tournament play.

"It's not going to hurt to have them back," Portsmouth coach Joe Arsenault said. "I think we took it for granted when we won the first game of the state series and then Salem came back and won Game 2 and we had a tough Game 3. They'll help keep the other kids focused."

Arsenault is back as the coach and will have his son, Beau, on the team. Prior to last year, Arsenault assisted Rick Fransoso in coaching the 11- and 12-year-old All-Stars to the 2002 state championship. He then aided Mark McCauley for the 9- and 10-year-old state championship in 2004 and the memorable ride to the Little League World Series for the 11- and 12-year-old team in 2006.

"We're the defending champs. Nobody is going to take us lightly," Arsenault said. "With 9- and 10-year-olds, anything can happen. We just have to play smart baseball and not make many mistakes. Our motto is: 'Defense for Districts.'"

Arsenault will have his fair share of pitchers to choose from, and he knows he may need all of them. Griffin, Taylor, Grattan, Saurman, Jimmy Dowd, Nathan Rand and Kyle Maurice will top the staff. Arsenault said he has more pitchers in reserve, just in case.

"At this level you need a lot of pitchers with the pitch count; you just can't rely on two," Arsenault said. "The fortunate thing with this team is that they all played at the major league level this year. That'll help us out."

Taylor and Saurman should be the main run producers.

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"We've got 14 kids and they all can hit," Arsenault said.

After Monday's game, Portsmouth hosts Somersworth and Laconia. Portsmouth will wrap up round-robin play on July 15 at Belmont.

Plains Field will be the host site for the best-of-three District II championship series, starting on July 18, between the two teams with the best record after round-robin play. The winner of that series will play the District I champion in a best-of-three state championship series in Windham, beginning on July 25.

Rye coach Dan Wilson assisted on last year's team and is taking over head coaching duties this season. Rye returns two players in Wilson's son, Eli, and Jack Ledger.

Wilson thinks his team's strongest asset will be it hitting. Jack Fox and Cody Graham are expected to lead a balanced lineup.

"That's the one thing we should be able to do well; everybody can hit up and down the lineup," Wilson said. "They can all make good contact."

Sam Fox, Hunter Porter, Trevor Durkin and Eli Wilson will be among Rye's top pitchers.

"We should be good; we're a little young," Wilson said. "We should have some fun and we'll see how they do."

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