

Redbirds lose emotional regional baseball battle to O'Fallon 2-1

by John Hough, Sports Writer
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HARDIN - Standing in the centerfield grass was the **Alton Redbirds** baseball coach, **Todd Haug**, and the rest of his players.

He hugged, consoled, and spent what seemed like an eternity with his players after what was a suspenseful and emotional finale between the vaunted **O'Fallon Panthers**.

“I wouldn’t change a thing,” Haug said. “The only thing I’ve asked of them all year is you buckle up your chin strap, you lace up your boots and you go to work and if you absolutely gave everything you had and you left it on the field, then we can walk away with our heads held high.”

Alton was 90 feet away from tying the game after being down 2-0 in the top of the seventh inning, with one out and runners on the corners against one of the toughest pitchers in Illinois, Bradley Harrison.

The Redbirds fell just short of the Panthers, losing 2-1 in the Alton Class 4A Regional Championship at Alton High School on Saturday and end their season at 23-12.

We practice it “I knew with it being the last out of the game that they’re definitely going to try and push it off Brad Harrison,” Schaefer said. “They went for it and luckily I got the throw to get it down.”

With the scenario the Redbirds had, it was perhaps a gamble worth trying to send McDonald to the plate with the game on the line and a chance to tie it.

“You do what you do and trust you do it well enough and every single ballgame we would have played this year, we would’ve sent in that situation,” Haug said.

“I don’t know what more this group could have done. We went toe-to-toe with an outstanding team,” Haug said. “I think that this shows that we’re an outstanding ball club as well.”

O’Fallon (32-5) advances to Bloomington Sectional Semifinals where they’ll meet Belleville West, who knocked out Edwardsville 8-4, earlier that day.

“Credit Bradley for competing like heck and credit Hayden Schaefer for doing an outstanding job in left field of doing what he’s asked to do in practice a million times,” O’Fallon coach Jason Portz said. “Catch the ball, work through it and throw a dart in a do-or-die situation. Some credit has to go to our catcher there, too, because he’s got to catch that ball, he’s got to make the tag and what a great team win for our guys.”

Harrison stayed perfect on the season, improving his record to 12-0. He threw a complete game and gave up four hits, struck out eight and walked two batters.

“I’ve been here a few times and usually when I’m on the mound I’m in a zone,” Harrison said. “When I’m on the mound I try to stay focused, I know what I need to do and it’s just a matter of getting it done.”

Aaron Bonnell and Steven Pattan each went 2-for-3 and was the only two batters that could muster any for Alton.

O'Fallon, who had previously beaten the Redbirds 5-0 and 7-0, looked to be on their way to another shutout victory, but Alton made them earn it every step of the way.

“You know they’re going to hang around any time you play a team that you’re so familiar with on a third occasion,” Portz said. “In the game of baseball, you just don’t know what’s going to happen. Any time you’re in a tight ballgame in the postseason, anything can happen.”

Schaefer had a decent day at the plate as well, going 2-for-3.

The game was scoreless until the bottom of third inning when Jared Dalonzo drove in Dillon Weiss on a single to right field off of Jacob St. Peters (7-4).

In the bottom of the fifth, Haug brought in University of Illinois-Chicago, Sam Ballard to face Harrison, a University of Southern Illinois-Carbondale signee, for a lefty-lefty matchup.

The two D1 players faced off and it was Harrison who came out on top with a solo homerun on a 3-2 pitch.

“It was a very good left handed pitcher against a very good left handed hitter,” Haug said. “It was a Division 1 pitcher throwing a Division 1 curveball. If he doesn’t swing it’s a called strike. goes down and he gulfs it out. Hat’s off to him.”

With a 2-0 lead going into the final inning with Harrison on the mound, the game seemed like it was locked up in a vault for the Panthers.

Alton had other ideas, though they hadn’t even gotten a runner to third base on him in over 20 innings, but managed to find a way when it mattered most.

Robbie Taul led off with a walk and Bonnell livened things up with a single to put two on and nobody out.

Heavy hitter, Jacob Kanallakan, laid down a textbook sacrifice bunt down the first base line to advance the runners to second and third base.

Next up was Pattan and he singled to center to score Taul, which set up the epic conclusion.

Alton was down to their last strike when Seth Foster was down in the count at 0-2, but he managed to fight off the pitch into left.

“What is a coach asking of a player at that point? Lets the get the ball in the outfield. Why is that a crucial situation? It’s because the fastest guy on the field is at third base with one out,” Haug said. “It was not a deep ball and quite honestly when the ball was thrown I thought it was high. They have to make a perfect play otherwise we are tied. In this case we would rather that then leave the guy standing at third base.”

The Redbirds lost the majority of their roster with 14 seniors graduating and they were one of the most successful class of players to come through the program with 104 wins through four seasons.

“What an outstanding group of very mature seniors,” Haug said. “They’re going to do things far greater than this game. They’re on a path to greatness and I felt very fortunate to be a stepping stone on a stopping point on their journey.”

