

Booten's based-loaded single in seventh gives Alton Junior Legion 6-5 win

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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ALTON — There’s an old adage in baseball that’s summed up to perfection by legendary 19th Century immortal Wee Willie Keeler, considered one of the first great stars of the game.

“Hit ‘em where they ain’t.”

That’s what Gage Booten had exactly in mind, as he drove a single past a drawn-in five-man infield into the gap to give Alton’s Junior American Legion baseball team a exciting 6-5 win over Eureka (Mo.)

It was a tight, nip-and-tuck affair all night against a club that plays exactly the same way as Alton.

“Eureka’s a good club,” said Alton manager Dennis Sharp. “District 10 (in Missouri), love playing them every year, we always have a good contest with them. They play the same way we do — small ball, steal, attack. It was kinda like playing ourselves tonight. It was a lot of fun.

“We haven’t had a game this good and competitive in a long while,” Sharp added.

Starting pitcher Griffin Blanco pitched very well, going five and two-thirds innings, allowing four runs on nine hits while fanning five and walking only one before giving way in the sixth. While he was in there, Blanco made some key pitches to get big outs when he needed them.

“I’m trying to get him a full seven,” Sharp said. “I’m trying to get him to finish. But he started out good, and he threw well, but he hasn’t thrown a lot either. He was at 75 pitches. He probably ran out of some gas.

“But Cullen (McBride, the game’s winning pitcher) came in and did a nice job,” Sharp continued. “He threw strikes, and we kept battling at the plate.”

That battling spirit came to light in the opening inning. Ryan Best led off with a walk/ Best was sacrificed to second by Issac Spencer, stole third and scored on a RBI single by Dylan LaHue. LaHue himself stole second and scored when Westley Laaker’s grounder was thrown away by the second baseman for an error and a 2-0 Alton lead.

Blanco pitched well at the start of the game, allowing only four base runners in the first three and two-thirds innings. Alton, however, missed opportunities in the second and third innings to extend its lead. Thanks in part to some stellar work by Ethan Grossman, who relieved starter Carter Beecher in the second.

Eureka drew level in the fourth, getting both of its run with two out. Ben Musgraves singled and stole second, scoring on Nathan Kovich’s RBI double. Mike Hotop singled home Kovich with the tying run, taking second on the throw. Eureka threatened to take the lead, but Spencer made a nice diving catch in left to rob Steve Beeler and end the inning.

Alton took back the lead in the bottom of the inning. Owen Stendebach led off with a single, and went to second on a passed ball. Adam Stilts drew a walk, and Cadan Akal singled to lead the bases. Stendebach scored two outs later on a sacrifice fly to center by Spencer to give Alton a 3-2 advantage. Clark then made another sparkling catch in the top half of the fifth to take a hit away from Josh Samuel.

Alton restored its two-run lead in the bottom of the fifth, starting with a LaHue lead-off double. He went to third on a wild pitch, and scored when Laaker reached on an error. Laaker reached third on another error, but could not score.

Eureka retied the game in the top of the sixth, and it was in a simple fashion. Nate Humphrey led off with a triple to the right center field alley, and scored on a wild pitch to pull Eureka to within 4-3. Robert Dotson came up as a pinch hitter, drew a walk and

went to third on an errant pickoff attempt by the pitcher. He scored on a Musgraves single to tie things up again, but a double play erased Musgraves, and after a base hit by Hotop, McBride came in and got a ground out to end the inning.

In the bottom of the sixth, Akal started off by reaching on a throwing error by the shortstop, and was sacrificed to second by John Durrwachter. A RBI single by Spencer scored Akal Alton had a chance to extend its lead again, but runners were stranded on first and second.

Samuel lead off the seventh by reaching after he was hit by a McBride pitch. Samuel stole second and came around to score one out later on a base hit by Gossman to tie the game again. But in the bottom of the inning, Brendan Walker and Stendeback lead off with singles, the latter on a sacrifice bunt. Akal singled one out later to load the bases and bring up Booten, who dropped a single over the drawn in infield and outfield to score Walker with the winning run.

“Gage is a good fundamental hitter,” said Sharp. “He’s gonna put the ball in play, he’s got that in-and-out swing, so you’re really not quite sure where he’s gonna place it. But he’s good at shooting pool, he kinda hits it in the corner pocket a lot. But he’s the kind of guy I like having up at the plate in that situation. He’s got a pretty cool temperament.”

Alton hosts Jerseyville in a 11 a.m. doubleheader tomorrow at Redbird Field, then has three District 22 games next week, against Belleville and Valmeyer for the first time this season, and a rematch against Highland, whom Alton defeated on Thursday 3-1. Overall, the start of the season is very pleasing to Sharp.

“So far, so good,” Sharp said. “We’re winning, and we’re just doing the right things, especially executing bunting, moving runners over and putting pressure on the defense. So that’s how you win.”

