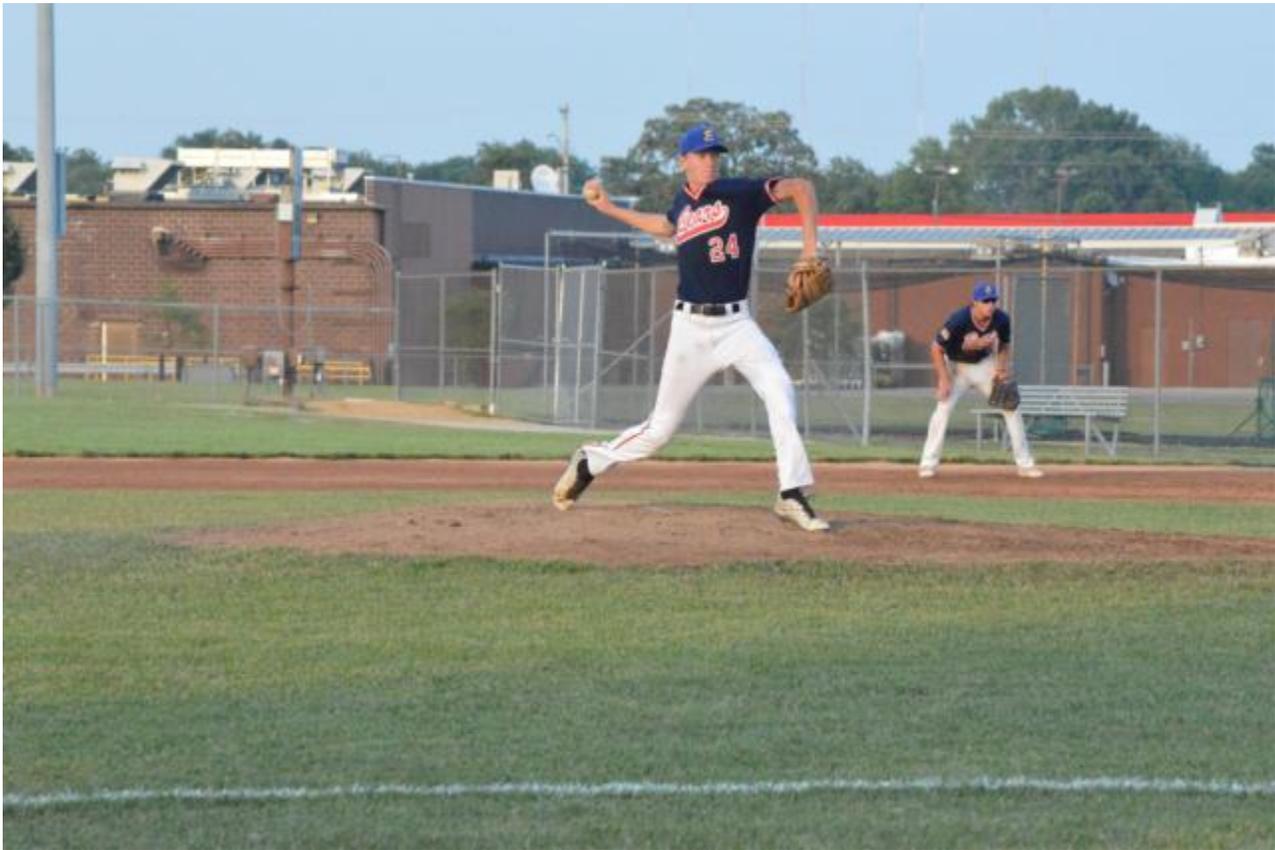


Bears take advantage of Highland miscues, advance to Fifth Division final

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
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HIGHLAND – The Metro East Bears went into Wednesday night's Illinois American Legion Fifth Division against Highland with a specific plan in mind.

Work the counts. Be patient. Be selective.

It worked to near-perfection in the opening inning as the Bears scored five times and knocked Highland starting pitcher Jake Ramsey out early en route to an 8-3 win to advance to Friday's championship round at Glik Park/Optimist Field.

The Bears will be off today and face either Highland, Aviston or Herrin – whoever emerges from the loser's bracket Thursday – at 3 p.m. Friday with a trip to next week's Legion state tournament in Rantoul on the line; should the Bears lose, a second game would be played at 7 p.m. to determine the division champion. Aviston and Herrin will square off at 3 p.m. today, with the winner meeting Highland at 7 p.m. for the other berth in the final.

The Bears went to 35-7 for the summer with the win, while Highland dropped to 16-12.

“We talked about that after the game with Aviston (Tuesday afternoon),” said Bears manager Ken Schaake. “We talked about good at-bats and not being overly anxious; tonight, they came out and did that. There were pitches that weren't that close – some were close – but the kids worked the counts.

“Corey (Price) got a couple of hits with two strikes on him, worked it back from an 0-2 or a 0-1 count and drives the ball into the gap. When they execute and just take their time and not try to do too much, do what they can, they do a really good job at the plate.”

One thing that plate discipline has done is help the Bears with key hits that has been a trademark for them this summer. “They don't swing at bad pitches – they haven't all year long,” Schaake said. “We haven't been getting ourselves out; tonight was just a prime example of a pitcher that was struggling in the first inning and the guys took advantage of it.”

Ramsey's struggles and some Highland base-running mistakes in the first two innings didn't help Highland. “We did it earlier this year, but it was a different story,” said Highland manager Harry Painter. “We gave them the four runs in the first inning on three errors (in a regular-season Bears win over Highland); tonight, it was a different situation. But I'll give it to my guys – they kept scrapping and Dusty (Phelps, who came in for Ramsey in the first) coming in and doing what he did – you take those five runs away in the first inning, what's the score?”

“We're not out of this; the same thing happened to us last year. We lost the same game, went down to the loser's bracket and won and we came back with virtually no pitching and beat a team twice. It can happen, so we're not out of this – we're going to put this aside and go.”

The base-running mistakes – Highland lost three runners in the second and third innings on errors on the base-paths – hurt, Painter thought. “I think the mood just dropped so hard right after that first inning that people weren't as mentally engaged,” Painter said. “I told them right before the game that the heat (temperatures were in the 90s at game time) would not be an excuse; we've got to beat the heat, no matter what – it cannot affect you mentally, it cannot affect you physically, but I think it was more of 'here we go again' and then we lose a little concentration.

“When you lose three base-runners between third and home in the first two or three innings – that's just a no-no. If those three runs score, this whole game is different.”

The Bears' five runs in the first came from an RBI double from Joel Quirin that scored Dylan Burris, a two-run triple from Price that scored Quirin and Blake Vandiver and a two-run Cole Hansel single that brought in Price and Steven Pattan. A Price RBI single in the second that drove home Vandiver increased the lead to 6-0 through two innings before Tate Wargo scored the final two runs on a Burris sacrifice fly in the third and a Burris RBI single in the fifth.

Andrew Frank got the ball for the Bears and went 6.2 innings before having to come out of the game because of Legion pitch count rules; Wargo took over and finished the game. Highland scored three times in the top of the seventh, but Frank struck out nine while conceding four hits in getting the win.

Burris went 1-for-2 with a RBI and run scored for the Bears, with Kade Burns 1-for-4, Quirin 2-for-4 with a double, RBI and run scored, Vandiver 2-for-2 with two runs scored, Price 2-for-4 with a triple, three RBIs and two runs scored, Steven Pattan a run scored, Hansel 1-for-4 with two RBIs and Wargo two runs scored.

