

# Bears bounce back in nightcap, win Fifth Division crown

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer  
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HIGHLAND – It didn't come easily at first.

But the Metro East Bears are heading to Rantoul.

The Bears had to do it the hard way, losing to Highland 7-6 Friday afternoon at Glik Park/Optimist Field, but bouncing back to defeat Highland 14-4 in five innings to claim the Illinois American Legion Fifth Division championship Friday evening.

The win sent the Bears to next week's Illinois American Legion state tournament in Rantoul, north of the Champaign-Urbana area, where they will open the tournament at 5:30 p.m. Wednesday against the hosts; the tournament runs through July 29, with the winner advancing to the Legion Great Lakes Regional in Napoleon, Ohio, in early August. Highland advanced to Friday's final by defeating Aviston Thursday night after Aviston had eliminated Herrin in an elimination game earlier Thursday afternoon.

“Highland put up a big battle,” said Bears manager Ken Schaake. “To take the first game like that, that puts the onus on us to win; they played very hard, we played very well – they just ran out of pitching. Fortunately, we still had a couple (of pitchers) left; that's probably the big difference right there in the second game.

“The first game, they matched us hit for hit and everything like that; we made five errors, but you still have to tip your hat to them – they put the ball in play and hit the ball hard. They got a couple of big hits that we didn't play well and they came out on top.”

But when it came down to the do-or-die second game, Tyler Lewis stepped up big for the Bears, striking out four and not allowing Highland to get much going. “He struggled a bit in the first inning and settled down about the third inning,” Schaake said “He was having trouble a little bit with the location of his pitches, but once he started getting them down in the zone – the ball moves a little bit more – they were putting the ball in play on the ground or popping it up.”

The Bear offense stepped up big in the nightcap, jumping out to a 6-1 lead through two innings and closing out the game with a four-run fifth after scoring three in the fourth. “I was hoping for that in the first game,” Schaake said, “but I did have confidence that, with the (between-games) break, they would gather themselves and come back and play the game the way they've played all year long.”

Blake Vandiver and Tate Wargo played key roles in the second game; Vandiver went 4-for-4 with a double and RBI and Wargo went 2-for-3 with two RBIs. “Blake bats in the middle of the order and puts the ball in play,” Schaake said. “He hits the ball hard and Wargo gets on base, has good speed and gives us speed in the bottom of the order – he's there to help us.”

Highland broke on top in the opener with a Jimmy Smith RBI double that scored Will Greenwald and a Jordan Smith sacrifice fly to center that brought in Steven Diaz. The Bears countered in the bottom of the first with two runs of their own when Vandiver and Corey Price both delivered RBI singles that drove in Kade Burns and Joel Quirin to tie things up at 2-2 before taking the lead in the second thanks to a Quirin RBI single that brought in Wargo.

Highland took the lead back with a three-run third highlighted by RBI singles from Jordan Smith and Elliott Pratt. The Bears pulled to 5-4 in the the bottom of the fourth before Highland added a run in the fifth; the Bears managed to pull to a 6-6 tie with a Wargo RBI single in the bottom of the fifth that drove in Steven Pattan and a bases-loaded walk in the sixth that scored Quirin. Pratt then drove in what proved to be the winning run in the top of the seventh when he tripled off Burns to score Jordan Smith.

Highland grabbed the lead in the first in the nightcap on a Jimmy Smith grounder to first that scored Greenwald, but Metro East tied it when Burns tripled in the bottom of the first and scored on an error before a five-run bottom of the second helped the Bears

begin to break away; Pattan opened the inning with a single and went to second on a Cole Hansel walk before Wargo singled home Pattan to put the Bears on top 2-1.

Konnar Loewen then delivered a two-run single to score Hansel and Wargo before scoring himself on a Dylan Burns single; Burns got to third before he scored on a Quirin sac fly to right, but the damage had been done. Highland scored twice in the third, but the Bears got a run back in the bottom of the inning, then scored three times in the fourth to extend the lead to 10-3, highlighted by a Pattan two-run single that brought home Quirin and Vandiver. Hansel then drove home Pattan with a single of his own.

Highland got a run of their won in the top of the fifth, but the Bears brought the game to an early end thanks to a four-run outburst in the bottom of the fifth. Burns opened with a single and came home on a Quirin single before Vandiver blasted a drive to right-center that hopped over the fence for a ground-rule double to score Quirin; a Pattan RBI single scored Vandiver and Pattan scored the game-ending run on a Wargo single with the bases loaded.

In the opener, Burns struck out three in taking the loss; Burris went 1-for-4 with a run scored, Burns had a run scored, Quirin 1-for-3 with a RBI and two runs scored, Vandiver 1-for-4 with a RBI, Price 3-for-4 with a RBI, Pattan a run scored, Hansel 1-for-2 with a double and Wargo 2-for-3 with a run scored.

In the nightcap, Burris was 2-for-4 with two runs scored, Burns 1-for-3 with a triple and run scored, Quirin 1-for-3 with two RBIs and two runs scored, Vandiver 4-for-4 with a double, two RBIs and two runs scored, Price two runs scored, Pattan 3-for-4 with three RBIs and two runs scored, Hansel 1-for-2 with a RBI and run scored, Wargo 2-for-3 with two RBIs and a run scored and Loewen 2-for-3 with three RBIs and a run scored.

“It feels good,” Schaake said of the the title. “These kids have played really hard all year long, put some things together for them and they've accomplished a lot; they've played 40 games and it's been a long summer for them, but by playing those games, we got our pitching staff to get a lot of innings in; they're ready to pitch in the tournament.”



