

Alton American Legion Post 126 hosts state tournament, ceremonies begin Friday night

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
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ALTON – Alton American Legion Post 126's baseball team is hosting this weekend's state American Legion tournament.

It's a big opportunity not only for Post 126 to reach the Legion Great Lakes Regional tournament, set for Aug. 8-12 at Mercy Field in Napoleon, Ohio, but also a big

opportunity to show off the facilities at Alton High School – especially Redbird Field, where the games will be played – to the five teams from around Illinois who will be coming to Alton for the tournament.

“It’s going to be a good tournament,” said Post 126 General Manager Dennis Sharp. “We’ve had the opportunity to host the (Illinois District 22) tournament, the (Illinois Fifth Division) tournament and the (Great Lakes) regional tournament before; we’re going to do what we’ve done with the other tournaments before in hosting the state tournament.

“We know the fans who will be coming to the tournament will be seeing some really good baseball.”

Tournament play gets under way at 11 a.m. Saturday at Redbird Field when Second Division champion Elgin Post 57 meets up with Fifth Division champion Newton Post 20, followed by First Division champ Mount Prospect taking on Third Division champ Milan Post 569 at 2 p.m. and tournament host Alton playing Fourth Division champion Danville at 5 p.m. Newton and Milan are making their first trips to the state tournament this year.

Play in the double-elimination tournament runs through Tuesday, with games scheduled for 11 a.m., 2 p.m. and 5 p.m. Sunday and Monday, with Tuesday games tentatively scheduled for 11 a.m. and 2 p.m., depending on which teams get through to the championship round; the top two teams will advance to the eight-team Great Lakes Regional, which also includes teams from Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin and Ohio, with the winner advancing to the American Legion World Series Aug. 16-21 in Shelby, N.C.

Opening ceremonies will be held prior to the first game each day, with first-ball ceremonies being handled by Mike Bellm, Alton High principal and a former Redbird baseball coach; Alton School Board president Ed Gray; and Alton school director Dave McClintock. The Alton High School Junior ROTC will present colors each day prior to the first game.



Tournament activities get under way this evening at AHS with a banquet honoring the teams who have reached the tournament followed by Hot Stove League-style get-together at 7 p.m. with former Cardinal third baseman Ken Reitz. Reitz played the Cardinals from 1972-75 and from 1977-80, with Reitz playing for the San Francisco Giants in 1976 before playing for the Chicago Cubs in 1981 and the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1982.

Both the banquet and the Hot Stove event are open to the public; admission for the event is \$20 before the event begins and \$25 at the door, with all funds raised going to expenses for this year's tournament and next year's state tournament, which Post 126 will be hosting.

That Alton is in this year's tournament as host team under Legion rules does give the Legionnaires a second chance to reach the regional; Post 126 manager Nick Paulda is excited for the opportunity. "We did bow out in the district tournament, but being the host team and having a second chance is something we're looking forward to," Paulda said. "We know we're going to be playing a good team in Danville and we're excited for the game."

"The players know this is a great opportunity for them; we've had guys who have had the experience of being in the state and regional tournaments (when the Alton and Edwardsville teams played together as the Metro East Bears); it's a great experience."

The chance to show off Redbird Field is also something the city of Alton and Post 126 is very excited about. "We take good care of the field and it's in great shape," Paulda said. "It's something we take pride in and the chance to show the rest of the state what we have here – it's a win-win situation for us as far as that goes."

"The atmosphere for baseball is going to be a good one," Sharp said. "The seats are really close to the field and the fans are really going to enjoy it; the field's in good shape."

Tournament sponsors include Riverbender.com, Roberts www.legionbb.com, Motors, LogoIt, St. Peters Hardware and the Confluence Business Advisors. For updates and information, visit www.legionbb.com.