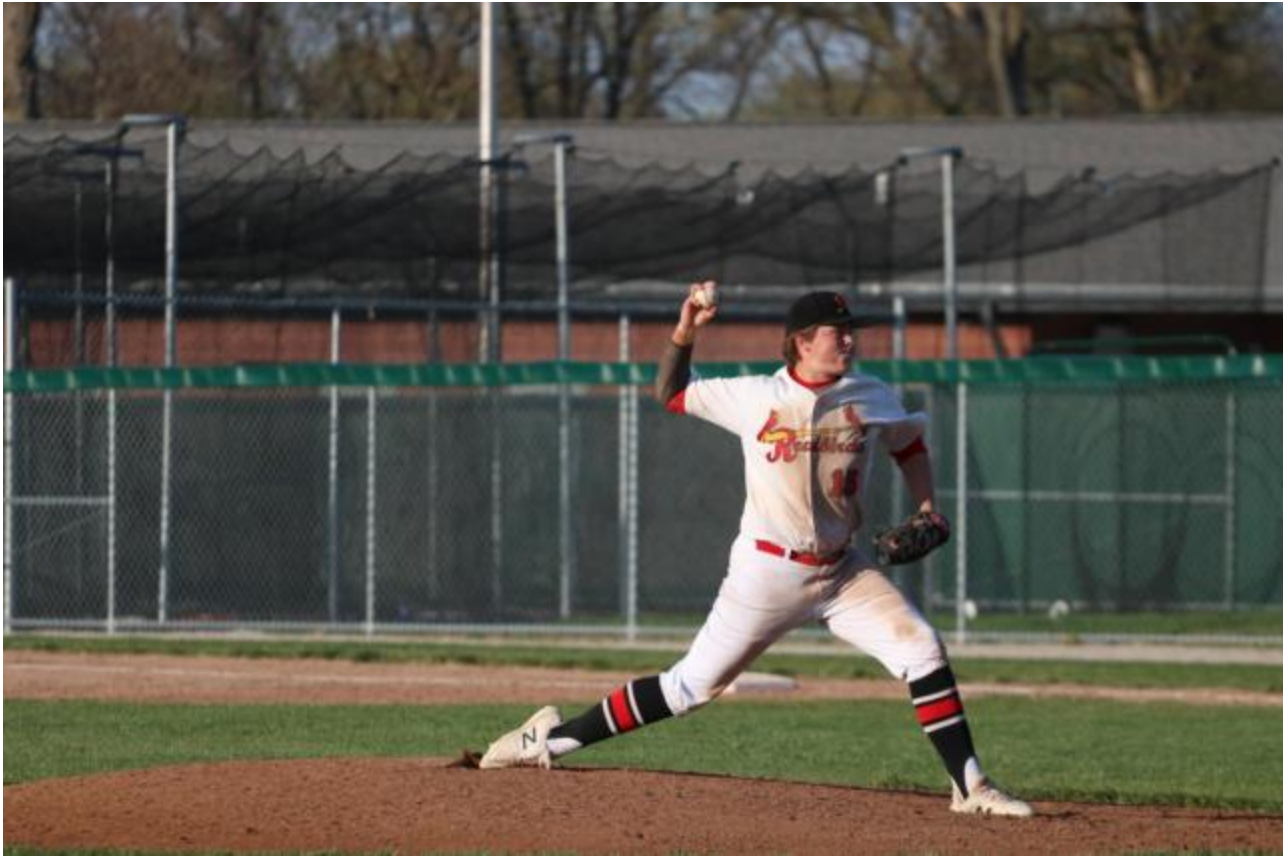


Alton recovers from "crazy" first inning to beat Belleville East

by John Hough, Sports Writer
April 18 2019 6:21 AM

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ALTON - Despite surrendering three runs without giving up a hit in the top of the first inning, the Alton Redbirds regrouped and calmly took the lead for good with a five-run barrage of their own to cap a crazy first inning.

Alton went on to defeat the Belleville East Lancers 13-4 in a Southwestern Conference game at Alton High School on Wednesday afternoon.

The Redbirds and Lancers split a two day, two-game series with Alton moving their record to .500 at 9-9.

A total of eight walks and two errors combined by both teams plagued the first inning with Alton's Riley Phillips and East's Drew Gray having a devil of a time locating the strike zone. The pair issued four batted balls apiece in that span. Not to be outdone, there were many past balls and wild pitches by both sides as well, which twice saw runners move from first base all the way across home plate within one at-bat.

"That's the craziest thing we've ever seen as coaches on both sides, unfortunately," Alton head coach Scott Harper said about the first inning. "The pitchers just got to understand. That's what we preach to them; throwing strikes is the name of the game, and obviously, all of that happens with a lot of free passes. Offensively that kind of woke us up and settled our nerves because we had a tough battle with them yesterday. So coming in today and put 13 up is huge."

Robby Taul was a vital part of those 13 runs. He finished 3-for-3 at the plate with two doubles and three RBI and now owns a .396 batting average. Caleb Noble and Phillips picked up two hits while Dylan Lahue and Nathan Lemons collected two RBI apiece.

"Any conference game it's going to be evenly matched with good players all around," Robby Taul said. "It felt good because we finally came out swinging unlike yesterday playing them. It was clicking on all cylinders. It takes time because a lot of kids didn't play a lot of varsity last year so it's just coming up and getting at-bats and I think it's starting to all work. This is the start of the season for us. Every game's a new day."

Despite a decent day at the plate for Phillips, he had a difficult time locating the strike zone out of the gate and so did the Alton defense.

Besides walking four hitters, Phillips nearly redeemed himself by getting two separate Lancers in rundowns via his pickoff move, but the first runner, Zecharia Georgian advanced when the throw from first base hit him on the helmet. Later, with Georgian at third and Evan Gray at first, Phillips got Gray in a rundown while the Redbirds infield simultaneously monitored Georgian and eventually threw him out at third base. However, on an attempt to complete a double play at second base, the throw from Zach Brooks

sailed into right-center field and coupled with some miscommunication out there, Gray tore around the bases and made it 1-0 East.

The Lancers scored two more runs when two pitches got away from the catcher, Owen Stendeback scoring Gabe Tindall and Gage Cruz.

In the bottom of the first inning, Drew Gray walked four of the first Alton hitters, and Lancer head coach Ryan Wiggs decided to bring in Jack Temmer to stop the early bleeding. He would get Tyler Steward to ground out, but Nathan Lemons drilled a pitch to dead center field off the wall for a two-run triple that gave the Redbirds a 4-3 lead. The next batter, Caleb Noble drove Lemons home on an RBI single giving Alton a 5-3 lead after the first inning.

“Huge,” Harper said of Lemon’s triple in the first inning. “He’s coming off a thumb injury and hasn’t been in the lineup for us. For him to come out and ring that triple out into center field and giving us the lead is big and being able to let us relax a little bit.”

In the bottom of the second, Taul rammed an RBI double, and Brooks drove him home two batters with an RBI ground out giving the Redbirds a 7-3 lead.

After giving up a run in the top half of the third inning, Alton would break the game open.

With the bases loaded with one out, Lahue knocked a two-run double to left field making it 9-4. The next batter was Taul, and he roped another two-run double. Phillips, who had a tough day on the mound would redeem himself big time with a long two-run home run over the right-field fence behind the outfield viewing area giving Alton a 13-4 lead.

“That’s what we expect from him coming through,” Harper said of Taul. “That senior leader being able to drive the ball and get some big doubles like that and Riley right after him. That’s a nice 2-3 combo there. Those two continue to have good days.”

Adam Stilts came on in relief for Phillips, who lasted two and one-third innings with three strikeouts and six walks while allowing four runs (one earned) and two hits.

Having pitched two innings the day before, Stilts was prepared and gave the Redbirds the lift they needed. He gave up two hits, and one run in four and two-thirds innings pitched with four strikeouts and one walk earning the victory.

“I faced two innings of them yesterday, and it really helped me today to focus on what I needed to work on from yesterday and take it into today’s game,” Stilts said. “I was

pitching to contact and knew I had a great defense behind me. We all got together as a team and patient. It was a big team effort and a big team win.”



