

'Never-Say-Die Attitude:' Alton Post 126 Rallies From 7-1, 8-2 Deficits, But Highland Wins 10-9 In Eighth To Eliminate Legionnaires

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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CENTRALIA - The Alton Post 126 senior American Legion baseball team pulled off an incredible comeback from a 7-1 and 8-2 deficit to score three runs in the top of the sixth and four more in the top of the seventh to take a 9-8 lead, but Highland came back with single runs in the bottom of the seventh and eighth innings to take a 10-9 win and eliminate the Legionnaires in the losers bracket semifinal of the Illinois Fifth Division tournament Saturday afternoon in Centralia.

Highland had defeated Alton in the first round of the tournament, relegating the Legionnaires to the losers bracket, with Alton pulling off three big wins to get to the semifinal before being eliminated. The resilience and never-say-die attitude of the team served them very well in their journey.

"A tough one to lose today," said Alton manager Doug Booten, "but what a great comeback by the kids. We just never quit; we just came up a little short. We had a great comeback, put together some good at-bats, got the key hits and took the lead, but in the end, Highland was just a little bit better. Hats off to them."

The Legionnaires played well all season, but seemed to play their best ball when the chips were down and the team faced adversity.

"It was a good group of kids that seemed to play well when their backs were against the wall," Booten said. "The kids love baseball and just went about their business. I'm real proud of them."

Highland jumped to a 6-0 lead, scoring four in the first inning and two more in the home half of the second before Alton got on the board with a run in the top of the third. Highland countered with a single run in the bottom of the fourth, then both teams traded runs in the fifth to give Highland an 8-2 lead. The Legionnaires then rallied with three runs in the top of the sixth and four more in the seventh to take a 9-8 lead, Highland tied the game in the bottom of the seventh with a single run, then scored the winning run in the eighth to take the 10-9 win.

Cameron Hailstone led the way for Alton with three hits and two RBIs, including a clutch home run, while Preston Schepers also had three hits in the game. Brendon Smith had two hits, including a homer, and three RBIs, while Andrew Wieneke had two hits and drove in a run, Caden Laslie had a hit and Bryce Higginbotham, Brady Salzman and Preston Kaylor all had RBIs for the Legionnaires.

Hailstone was the starting pitcher, and went an inning-and-two-thirds and gave up six runs on four hits while walking four, then gave way to Smith, who went four-and-two-thirds innings, allowing four runs on seven hits, walking one while striking out six, and Blaine Lancaster pitched an inning, conceding one hit while walking one and fanning one.

The Legionnaires will take the next two weeks off, then hold tryouts for the 2022 team in mid-to-late August. Meanwhile, Booten will enjoy the memories of the season despite all of the challenges it created.

"it was a challenging season, with a lot of great memories," Booten said. "COVID, the IHSA and a lack of American Legion teams, a little bit of everything. But the kids stuck with it, and I couldn't be any more proud of them. They were a great group, and I'll miss them all."

The junior Legionnaires begin their postseason campaign on Monday in the junior Fifth Division tournament in Trenton, taking on Jerseyville in the opening round.