



RBGA Hits A Home Run With Its March Small Business Honoree

by Debbie Hagen
March 8 2023 7:00 AM



GODFREY - The RiverBend Growth Association has chosen to honor the Alton River Dragons with its March 2023 Small Business of the Month award, as the baseball team gets ready for Season 3 at the ballpark.

The Alton River Dragons are a collegiate summer baseball team, founded in 2020 as part of the Prospect League, Western Conference, Prairie Land Division. The team began playing in 2021 at Alton's Lloyd Hopkins Field, located at Gordon Moore Park and were division champions in 2022.

“The idea and mission/concept of the Alton River Dragons Baseball Team started in 2019,” noted Owner Steve Marso. “I began exploring cities for a potential expansion franchise in the Prospect League. I had worked in baseball prior for around 25 years or so but had been out of the business for about four years. I had the idea to get back into the business, and after looking at a couple of other markets, our league commissioner called and said, ‘What about Alton, Illinois?’”

“I was unfamiliar with Alton but decided to check it out. I had owned a team in Waterloo, Iowa,” Marso continued. “When I had bought that team, I recalled walking into the ballpark and having a real ‘a-ha’ moment. When I first walked into Lloyd Hopkins Field, I had that same feeling, so I knew there was something there.”

Marso then began a search for a general manager. “I put it out on social media that I was looking, and I reached out to many of my old ‘baseball friends’ to see if they had anybody in mind. I also had an old friend from Waterloo, Iowa, who had posted about a friend of his who did logo design. As I was in need of a logo, I reached out.” That old friend from Waterloo, Iowa was Dallas Martz.

“One day, he sent me an email asking, ‘Do you have a general manager yet?’ I said no and asked if he had someone in mind. His response was, ‘Yes, me.’ We talked and I immediately knew it would be a good fit.” Martz came and visited Alton and immediately loved it, Marso shared. Martz later moved and became a resident of Alton.

“We then began the process of starting the team from the ground up. It has been a fantastic experience, getting the River Dragons going, and going into Season 3 we are even more excited than we started,” Marso added.

Since the Alton River Dragons came into the ballpark, it has had a nearly complete transformation. Ballpark turf was installed, which Marso said was “a tremendous game changer.” An \$80,000 video board has also been installed, and there’s further development including a new party structure valued at about a \$100,000 value, a speed pitch in the left field, new concessions equipment, upgraded sound, and a locker room that is brought in during each season.

“We plan to continually make improvements to the ballpark to enhance the fan experience,” Marso noted, “but also to make it a better place for the players as well.”

Game day staff modifications have also come as play got underway each season. Marso said that they had thought the draw of people would be on the third base side, so initially, that is where they built up staff. As it turns out, though, more fans were coming to the first base side, so they adjusted the staff placement for that. With Martz as the GM

and sole full-time employee currently, the River Dragons further employ over 30 during the season and are evaluating at what point they will need to increase those numbers.

“For our general manager, the league offers a lot of collaborative leadership training as the majority of the 17 teams in our league work closely together,” said Marso. “As we are entering our third season, we are always open to additional training as we define the needs and also the wants of our staff. And, for our part-time staff, we offer opportunities such as food service and Serve Safe training as well as alcohol awareness training.”

“We see ourselves not so much as just a sports team, but more about family entertainment. We feel we are in competition for the family entertainment dollar, so we really ‘step up our game’ in terms of value in our product – high quality both in terms of the product on the field and in the products we serve from our concession and merchandise areas. Cleanliness throughout the ballpark is also of utmost importance because it undoubtedly impacts the fan and family experiences,” Marso said.

Marso pointed out how the River Dragons team impacts the Riverbend area economy as well. “In addition to all the products and services the River Dragons purchase, we also bring a great economic impact to the area through hotel stays, restaurant visits, grocery store purchases, etcetera. For example, in addition to the team bringing in money to the region, we brought in a college tournament that created over \$250,000 in economic impact. For 2023, we already have a Division 2 tournament schedule that is estimated to bring in over \$420,000 in economic impact and are currently working on a Division 1 tournament that should bring in significantly more.”

“We really want our organization to not only be a baseball team but to really benefit the community as a whole. At the River Dragons, we feel that we are truly a part of the community and want to give back in any way we can,” Marso said further.

For the last two seasons, the Alton River Dragons have contributed over \$2,500 to the Boys and Girls Club of Alton through its 50/50 tennis ball toss during games. The team has also contributed hundreds of tickets and other packages to churches, schools, youth, and any organization in need. The River Dragons team also offers a fundraising package in which organizations needing to raise funds can sell game tickets and keep 50 percent of the sales proceeds.

Marso added, “In terms of volunteering, we are looking to grow that this year through getting our players, mascot, and staff out to help with various causes and organizations. We have a season ticketholder/host family that works with a nonprofit providing beds to youth in need, so we will be doing some volunteer work with them. We are currently evaluating any other opportunities that can get our group out into the community in an impactful way.”

Ongoing challenges faced by the River Dragons are not necessarily within their control: Competing events and extreme Midwest summer heat are two examples. “We also are challenged by higher product costs. One big challenge, however, that also stands out is our bus bill for the players. In year 1 it was around \$30,000, the next season it increased to \$47,000. This is a challenge that we have to overcome.

“All in all, we manage the challenges and make sure we are excelling going forward,” Marso further noted. And Season 1 opening night is its own challenge story; one Marso is certain will not soon be forgotten.

In regard to receiving the March 2023 Small Business of the Month recognition from the RiverBend Growth Association, Marso said, “We’d like to thank the RBGA for the nomination; it really means a lot to us. We are so excited to continue being a part of the Alton, and overall Riverbend, community.”

To learn more about the Alton River Dragons and its 2023 season, visit online at altonbaseball.com, send an email to alton@prospectleague.com, or call (618) 433-3665.

The RiverBend Growth Association is the Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development organization for the 11 communities known as the Riverbend. For more information about the Growth Association, visit www.growthassociation.com or call (618) 467-2280.

RBGA’s Small Business of the Month Committee recognizes a different member business each month for its outstanding efforts and leadership in the community. Committee members include Brenda Eardley, Adrianna Lock, Sam Quigley, Amy Roady, Kristen Ryrie, Martha Schultz, and Amy Smith.

To learn more about membership in the RiverBend Growth Association and the Small Business of the Month recognition, visit the RBGA website or call their Godfrey office.

