

Redbirds sneak past Quincy 4-3; move to title game against Edwardsville

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
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It wasn't looking good for Alton's baseball team Thursday afternoon.

The Redbirds had basically been shut down by Quincy pitcher Drake Gordon through six innings of their IHSA Class 4A Edwardsville Regional semifinal match at Tom Pile Field. Only one Redbird baserunner had even gotten to third all day long and the Blue Devils were just three outs away from pulling off what would be a stunning upset.



Alton had other ideas, and a leadoff homer from Aaron Bonnell sparked what turned into a four-run, game-winning rally, capped off by a two-run single from Jacob Skrabacz, that gave the Redbirds a stunning 4-3 win and a berth to the regional final

Saturday morning, where they'll be facing host Edwardsville in a matchup many had been anticipating.

Given the circumstances and the way it happened, though, Redbird coach Todd Haug was pretty ecstatic after the game. "This has to go down as the biggest win of my career here," Haug said. "I was telling the kids that's the beauty of the game; it can be a love-hate thing, but you play 21 hard outs, seven strong innings, you figure out a way and you go home happy."

Part of the Redbird strategy was saving pitching ace Bryan Hudson for a potential showdown with the Tigers; they gave the ball to Ben Cusac, but he lasted just three-plus innings, giving up three earned runs (two in the second and another in the fourth) and five hits before being lifted in the fourth for Jacob St. Peters.

Not that Haug had any regrets. "We decided to roll the dice," Haug said. "We've got full confidence in Ben; things just didn't work out today."

St. Peters stepped in and retired the first three Blue Devil batters he faced with a runner at second and a run in, then got some key defensive plays the rest of the way to help keep Quincy at bay.

"Jake was outstanding today," Haug said. "He comes at right-handed batters at a nasty angle; he was our unsung hero today."

Still, Gordon also kept the Redbirds in check; the closest the came to scoring came in the fifth, when Steven Nguyen reached on a fielder's choice, stole second and got to third on a Gordon wild pitch, but Carter Hayden struck out and Skrabacz grounded to short to end the threat.

St. Peters and the Redbird defense came up big in the sixth and seventh as well, St. Peters striking out Ben Mara and getting Matt Tossick to fly to right to end the threat, then inducing Johnny Reckers to ground into a double play and Carson Frye to fly to center to set up the dramatic bottom of the seventh.

It started when Bonnell launched a 2-2 pitch from Gordon over the fence in left to cut the lead to 3-1. It was seemingly a small thing, but it suddenly gave the Redbirds a big lift.

"It was definitely a tough situation," Bonnell said, "but I got a good pitch to hit and got it out of the park. It really got the bench up."

It also got the Alton supporters in attendance fired up too, and with new life, the Redbirds came alive. Drake Hampton followed Bonnell's shot with a double to the fence in center and Steven Nguyen walked to put runners at second and third.

Up came Hayden, who attempted to lay down a sacrifice bunt. The ball was fielded by Gordon, who fired to first, but the throw was high and brought in Hampton and put Hayden at second and Nguyen at third to bring up Skrabacz, who wasted no time, connecting with a 0-1 fastball through the hole at short to bring in both Nguyen and Hayden and set off a huge celebration.

“That was a rough game for awhile,” Skrabacz said, “but Aaron's bomb and Drake's shot really got us going.”

The showdown between the Redbirds and Tigers begins at 11 a.m., with the winner advancing to the Illinois Wesleyan Sectional in Bloomington next week; the semifinal game against the Granite City Regional champion will be played in the Metro-East area at a site to be determined.

“We're in a tough region,” Haug said, “but I like our chances.”





