Alton Junior Legion baseball team rebounds with 10-run sixth inning

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It wasn't looking all that great for Alton American Legion Post 126's junior baseball team at Gordon Moore Park/Lloyd Hopkins Field Wednesday evening despite Alton coming off a 5-0 win over Bethalto at home Tuesday night.

The junior Legionnaires had made their share of mistakes against Highland and squandered a couple of opportunities, which put them behind going into their half of the sixth.

But baseball can be one of those games where everything can turn in the blink of an eye, and something like that happened as Alton got some key hits and took advantage of walks and miscues to put up a 10-run sixth in an 11-3 win.

"We had to understand a few things," said Alton manager Dennis Sharp. "We'd been having some trouble getting bunts down, and that's a crucial part of the game. But a bunt opened up our big inning, and I hope what happened reinforces the message we're trying to send to the kids about the little things.

"Something else we need to better is to take care of the runners when they're on base and we're up. It's something really crucial to do, especially when we start playing the good teams; you have to take care of your runners and keep your mistakes to a minimum."

Those little things – getting bunts down, taking care of runners – are what Australian Rules football coaches often refer to as "one percenters", the small things on which games can sometimes turn. It's something Sharp believes his team must get better at to enjoy success.

"We have to get better at things," Sharp said. "It was good that we battled back, but we've got to play all 21 outs every time out. We've got to get into the other team's bullpen to give ourselves a better chance to win every night."

Highland got on the board quickly, Steven Diaz and Dillon Hallermann opening with singles before Montana Gabbert reached on a fielder's choice to score Diaz in the first. Austin Hickman and J.D. Wellen then singled to open the second before David Lutostanski singled in Hickman to put Highland to a 2-0 lead.

Alton bounced back in the third when Braden Flanigan reached on an error with one out, followed by Steven Nguyen reaching on an error. Flanigan went to third on a wild pitch and scored on a Steven Pattan single to cut the lead to 2-1, but Highland got the two-run lead back in the fifth when a Gabbert RBI single brought home Diaz.

Then came the decisive bottom of the sixth, when Patten, Tate Wargo and Simon Nguyen all singled to load the bases. Brandon Droste then lifted a sacrifice fly to right to score Pattan, but a walk to Jake Reiter loaded the bases again. Flanigan singled in Wargo with the tying run and a fielder's choice to Steven Nguyen loaded the bases again.

A Tyler Moxey walk and singles from Storm Coffman and Pattan and Wargo reaching on an error, with another error clearing the bases, brought home several more runs to put Alton ahead for good, with Highland being retired in order to end the game.

The junior Legionnaires are scheduled to host a pair of weekend doubleheaders, taking on Valmeyer tonight and Highland Sunday. Both twin bills begin at 5:30 p.m.