



Metro East Bears score 9-0, 6-4 victories in Firecracker Tournament

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
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The Metro East Bears did their part in their Saturday games at the Southwestern Illinois Firecracker Tournament's Pool A at Gordon Moore Park/Lloyd Hopkins Field, scoring a 9-0, six-inning win over Columbia, Mo., on Saturday morning, then scoring three times in the bottom of the sixth to down Fulton, Mo., 6-4 Saturday night.

In the end, though, the Bears just fell short, being eliminated on a tiebreaker by Texarkana, Ark., for the wild card berth for Sunday's semifinal games.

The Bears went 3-1 in their pool competition, ending up tied with Mt. Vernon for first in the pool; Mt. Vernon, however, advanced by having defeated the Bears Friday night. The semifinals are set for 11 a.m. and 1:15 p.m. Sunday at Longacre Park in Fairview Heights, with the final scheduled for 3:30 p.m.

“We played pretty well,” said Bears manager Ken Schaake after the Fulton game. “It turned out to be a tougher game than we thought; they have a good team, they hit well and threw strikes. We came up a bit anxious to start but got some big hits from Aaron (Jackson) and Nick (Paulda) came through with a big hit that won the game for us.

“We definitely came out to play, especially considering we had two games on a holiday; the kids love to play the game and really did well.”

Saturday's opening game came on the heels of the loss to Mt. Vernon, and the Bears, who were the visiting team for the contest, wasted no time establishing themselves, Maverick McSparin opening a two-out rally with a double. Jackson brought him home with a single and went to second when Paulda walked. Caleb Buhs then tripled down the line in right to bring in Jackson and Paulda and scored himself on a sharp single by Connor Melton to get Metro East out to a quick 4-0 lead.

“We were ready to play and we went out with some intensity,” Schaaake said after the morning win. “We were hitting solid at the plate and once a couple guys got hits, it was contagious.”

The Bears had to get out of a bases-loaded, none-out jam in the bottom of the second; it started when Brian Bolton reached on an error, followed by Bryce Logedon reaching on a fielder's choice error and Brett Groves being hit by a pitch. But Anthony Kindle struck out Brendan Gray and Andrew Baker and got Parker Wilkinson to ground into a fielder's choice to put out the fire and keep the lead intact.

Kindle settled down after that, allowing only two baserunners from the third inning on. The Bears scored twice more in the third when Jacob Skrabacz and Drake Hampton had RBI singles, once in the fifth on a Hampton sacrifice fly to right and twice in the sixth on a Melton sacrifice fly to center and a Skrabacz RBI single to bring the game to an early end.

Fulton got out to a quick lead in the nightcap, Luke Gray and Isaiah Pani singled off Jackson to start the game and Jared Perry singling in a Gray to put Fulton off to a 1-0 lead. The Bears countered in the second when Kyle Zach singled in Buhs to tie the game, but Fulton took advantage of a couple of fielding miscues to score twice and take a 3-1 lead in the top of the third.

Undaunted, the Bears tied the game in the bottom of the third when Hampton walked and stole second and came home on a Jordan Hovey double. Jackson then doubled with one out to bring in Hovey and tie the game. Things remained that way until the bottom of the sixth, when Jackson opened the inning with a triple to deep center field and scored when Paulda singled him home. With one out, Melton reached on an error and Zach walked to load the bases, and Skrabacz doubled in Paulda and Melton to for a pair of insurance runs.

Fulton scored once in the seventh when Sabin Cassidy doubled home Alex Fleetwood, but Jackson retired the final two batters to preserve the win.

The Alton Junior American Legion team advanced to the final of the Jim Medlock Memorial Tournament in Hazlewood with wins Friday and Saturday. Post 126 defeated the St. Louis Capitals 3-2 and the host American-National team 4-2 on Friday, when win over the St. Louis Surge 7-4 and American-National 8-7 to reach the final; they will take on the Maryland Heights Junior Legion team at 1 p.m. Sunday for the championship.

The Bears return to action at 7:30 p.m. Monday when they take on Fairview Heights in a District 22 game at Lloyd Hopkins Field.

