

Bears continue play in Illinois American Legion Fifth Division Tournament

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
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Everything the Metro East Bears have been working for culminates in one four-day period this week.

The Bears, who have won the Illinois American Legion Fifth Division Tournament championship in convincing fashion over Teutopolis last week, are playing in the Illinois American Legion baseball tournament in the Chicago suburb of Carol Stream. The Bears, however, will have to go through the loser's bracket to win the tournament;

they dropped a 10-3 decision to Mattoon in their opener Wednesday afternoon and will play again at noon Thursday.

The tournament is being hosted by Wheaton Post 76 and will also feature three other Division champions, Northwest, Elgin and Galesburg for a spot in next week's Legion Great Lakes Regional at Gordon Moore Park/Lloyd Hopkins Field. As host team, the Bears are automatically in that tournament under Legion rules, but regardless of that fact, they're out to win their way into the tournament.

“We've taken the first two steps, winning the (Division 22) tournament and the Fifth Division tournament,” said Bears manager Ken Schaake in an interview prior to the tournament. “Now there's one more step before the regional, and the kids are anxious to win their way into the tournament.

“They're all excited about the possibility; they're all a bunch of great kids and they have a lot of pride about how they go about playing baseball. They want to prove they can earn their place in the tournament.”

What Schaake has been impressed with throughout the course of the summer is how well the players encourage each other and pick each other up. “When things go wrong, they don't get upset with each other and they don't berate someone else,” Schaake said. “They play the game the right way. We've got kids who really pick each other up, and I think that's a reflection of how their parents raised them. The parents plant the seeds, we get to cultivate it.”

The Bears did run into a bit of trouble in their first two Fifth Division games, but bounced back and ended up winning them before blowing out Teutopolis in the final to advance to state. “We did have a couple of tough games, but the kids persevered and it carried them through,” Schaake said. “When we got to the final, the kids simply went out and made a statement.”

While the Bears will be facing some unfamiliar opposition in the tournament, Schaake believes all the teams will be in the same boat. “We just ask the kids to go out there and play the best that they can,” Schaake said. “As long as we give our best effort every time out, if we get beat by a better team, that's how it goes. We just want to play as hard as we can and let things happen.

“We've played well all year, and we're hoping we go up there and just enjoy the moment. As long as we play our game, we'll see what happens.”