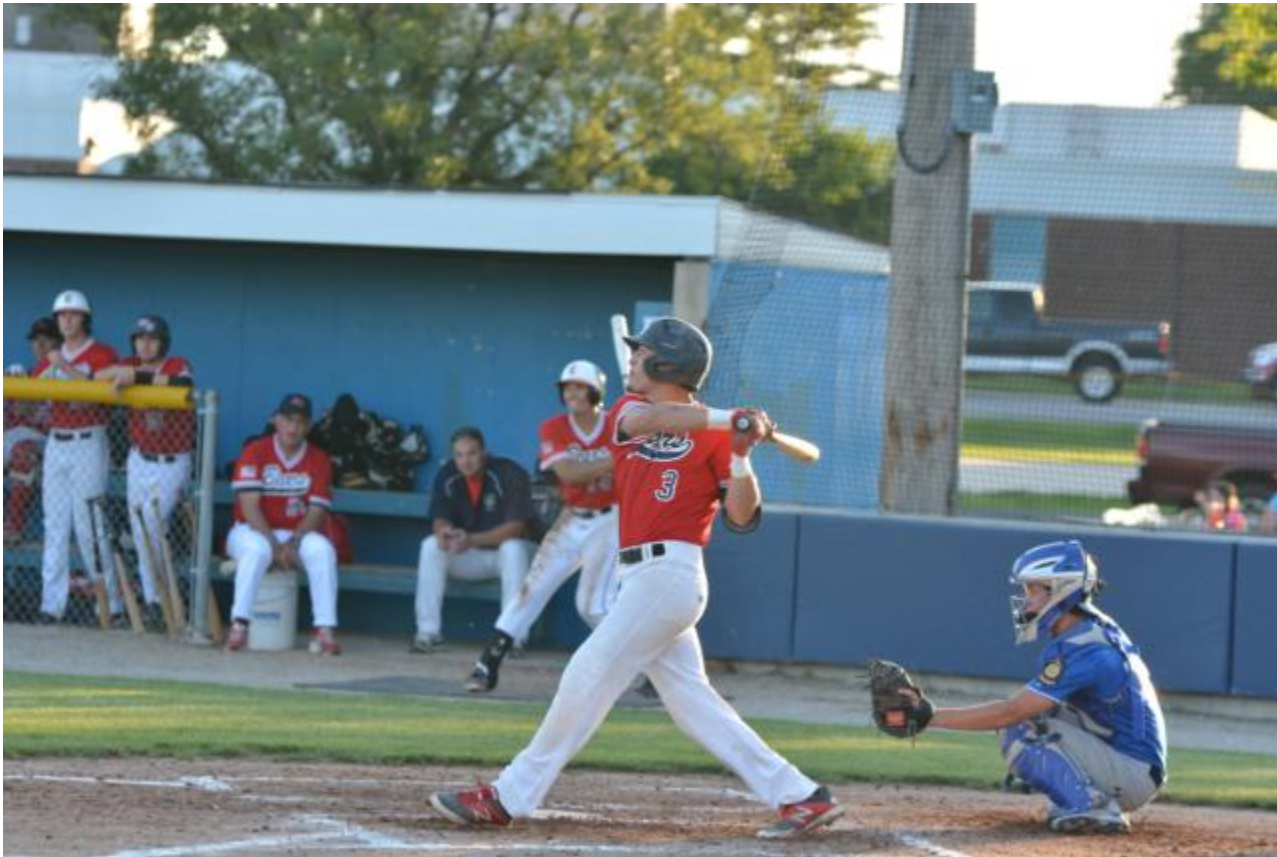


# Metro East Bears fall only one game short of quest to take Illinois American Legion title

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer  
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**CAROL STREAM** – The Metro East Bears fell just a game short of their quest to take the Illinois American Legion state baseball championship Saturday.

Along the way, however, the Bears showed the kind of character they have, a character that can still take them a long way.

The Bears fought their way through the loser's bracket after dropping their opening-round game to Mattoon to reach Saturday's final, where they lost to Elgin 9-5 to give Elgin the state title. However, both teams reached next week's American Legion Great Lakes Regional tournament, which will be held at **Gordon Moore Park/Lloyd Hopkins Field**, Elgin as state champions and the Bears as host team.

"I'm very proud of the kids," said Bears manager Ken Schaake. "We could have folded up our tents, but we didn't and showed a lot of character in fighting through the loser's bracket to get to the championship. We beat Wheaton, then Mattoon and Northwest to get there and we really showed a lot of character."

The Bears had to win twice Friday to reach Saturday's final, eliminating Mattoon 18-5 in seven innings in their first game, then ousting Northwest 6-5 in 10 innings on a Drake Hampton single Friday night. That game did not end until late Friday night and didn't give the Bears much rest before taking the field late Saturday morning.

Schaake wasn't making excuses, though. "We didn't get back to our hotel until late and by the time we all got settled down, it was about 1 in the morning," Schaake said. "But we aren't making excuses. It was tough playing as much as we did, but for us to get to where we were really showed a lot. We fought through everything and just fell a bit short."

Against Elgin, Jordan Hovey was 2-for-4 with a home run, a RBI and run scored, while Aaron Jackson was 2-for-5 with a run scored and Nick Paulda was 2-for-4 with a double and a RBI. Maverick McSparin got the ball and went 6.1 innings while giving up an earned run and 10 hits while striking out four. Kory Loew threw an inning and gave up three earned runs on two hits while fanning one and Jacob St. Peters and Connor Melton also pitched for Metro East.

Elgin took a 4-0 lead through four-and-a-half innings before the Bears got on the board; they also scored twice in the seventh and three times in the eighth before the Bears made it close with two in the eighth and one in the ninth.

The Bears exploded for five in the third and six in the sixth on their way to the rout of Mattoon Friday afternoon. Aaron Jackson got the win for the Bears, going the distance while giving up five earned runs on 10 hits and striking out four. Hovey was 2-for-5 with a homer, four RBIs and two runs scored, while Paulda was 2-for-5 with a pair of doubles and three runs scored, Melton was 3-for-4 with three RBIs and two runs scored,

McSparin was 3-for-5 with a double, two RBIs and three runs scored, Caleb Buhs was 2-for-4 with a double, two RBIs and two runs scored and Chance Foss was 2-for-4 with a triple, three RBIs and a run scored.

In the Northwest win, Zac Cato went 7.2 innings and gave up three earned runs on five hits and dismissing two by strikeout, while Hovey tossed the final 2.1 innings and gave up five hits while striking out two. Hampton went 5-for-6, including the game-winner, while doubling twice and driving in a pair while scoring once. Melton went 2-for-4 with a RBI and Melton was 2-for-4 with a triple and RBI.

While the Bears would have liked to have won the tournament, coming back through the loser's bracket and reaching the final is nothing to be upset about, Schaake felt. "We would have liked to win, but we are the second-best team in the state and the way we did it says a lot," Schaake said. "The boys all did a fine job and they've got something to think about going into the regional."

"Elgin's a fine team and they did a great job against us. But I'm very proud of the kids and we're looking forward to the regional."

That regional gets started at 10 a.m. Wednesday, with games each day at 10 a.m., 1 p.m., 5 p.m. and 8 p.m. The final is set for 1 p.m. Aug. 9, with a second game set for 4 p.m. if necessary in the double-elimination tournament.