

# Banquet welcomes Great Lakes American Legion baseball regional tourney to Alton

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer  
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**ALTON** – This week's **Great Lakes American Legion baseball regional tournament** got under way Tuesday night with a pre-tournament banquet at Spencer T. Olin Golf Course at Gordon Moore Park.



The eight-team double-elimination tournament starts Wednesday at Lloyd Hopkins Field, with teams from Elgin, Ill.; Madison, Wis.; Plover, Wis.; Troy, Ohio; Rock Port, Ind.; Paducah, Ky.; and Midland, Mich., joining the host Metro East Bears in competing for a berth in next week's American Legion World Series in Shelby, N.C. The finals are set for 4 p.m. Sunday afternoon, with a second game (if necessary) set for 7 p.m.

The tone for the tournament was set by St. Louis Cardinals assistant general manager Mike Girsch, who spoke to the teams and Legion officials about a discussion he had with Cardinal general manager John Mozeliak when Girsch mentioned to Mozeliak that he would be speaking at the dinner.

“I didn't know much about American Legion baseball, and we were in the middle of talking about players at the trade deadline,” Girsch said. “When I mentioned American Legion baseball and that I would be speaking tonight, his eyes lit up; he had played it and coached it in Colorado as well as ran the state tournament there. He talked about his experiences with Legion baseball and how it helped him.”

Girsch admitted he wasn't, as he put it, “a baseball guy” growing up. “I have a degree in math from Notre Dame and an MBA from the University of Chicago's Booth School (of Business),” Girsch said. “You could say I was a math geek; we squeeze every amount of information we can out of every pitch, analyze it and predict how a player will perform, but it's not the only thing we look at.

“We look at what kind of players they are. We want the kind of player that will take responsibility about what happens, not point fingers at someone else or make excuses when something goes wrong, even when it's not their fault. We want players who will work hard all the time, no matter what the situation is. We put an emphasis on leadership as well; we want players who will help the younger players coming up understand what it takes to be on the team and what it takes to play for the Cardinals.”

Girsch talked about what he did when he decided to pursue his dream of working for a big-league team. “I was working a consulting job, but I wanted to be a GM for a baseball team,” Girsch said. “I put together an analysis of every player who was drafted in the 1990s and sent them to all the big-league teams. Twelve of them responded with something like a 'don't call us, we'll call you' response, but the Cardinals were one of three teams who liked what they saw. I wound up being hired by the Cardinals (in 2006) and moved to St. Louis with my wife and twin daughters with another on the way in an entry-level job.

“There were no guarantees, but I caught a few breaks and now I'm in where I am. I experienced something big and you should all pursue whatever dream you have.”

The banquet also featured presentations from Alton Mayor Brant Walker, who welcomed the competing teams to the area; Col. Anthony Mitchell, the commander for the St. Louis District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; Jackie Watts, a program director based in Kansas City, Mo., for Operation Homefront; and Chad Opel, who was a member of the 1998 Illinois Class AA state baseball champion Edwardsville team and on the 1998 Edwardsville American Legion team that won the Legion World Series in Las Vegas that year.