

ALL STARS AND INTEREST IN OTHER ACTIVITIES
Report to the Director
October 7 2023

Expectations From the Beginning

We knew we did not have all the answers when we started in 2020. But we believed that Legion baseball had failed to respond to shifts in the baseball marketplace nationally and at the state level with additional programming in the face of the accelerating growth of multi-community baseball teams. Legion baseball in Minnesota has rigidly stuck to its single school district team model for league and playoffs. Minnesota Legion allows a maximum enrollment of 3,600 which is half of the national requirement. Nearly 90% of Legion players end their baseball season in the third week of July, about halfway through the summer. Many in D2

Did anyone want something more from the Legion label? If so, what?

- 1) We expected that we would learn to better develop All-Star Weekend as we went along.
- 2) We expected to see if there was interest in advancing other multi-community competitive and development options.

2023 All-Star Summary

The 2023 all-star program expanded somewhat significantly while the all-star support group shrank. Some area of growth:

- 1) The event was expanded to a full weekend with games on Saturday and Sunday – three for each of the four teams.
- 2) The senior event was moved to Roseville – University of Northwestern will all turf practice and game facilities.
 - a. The cost was \$3200 which included full staffing for the events.
 - b. Gate covered approximately \$2700 of the field and staffing cost.
 - c. The facility provided a complete 4-station practice facility allowing all teams to practice at the same time.
 - d. The site provided central access to college coaches that we hoped would attend in decent numbers. They did show, too.
- 3) Semi-permanent game jerseys were purchased that gave a more elite all-star look to the event.
- 4) A Twins game experience was added for Friday night that sold 180 seats, tripling our expectations, adding to the full weekend baseball experience for our families.
- 5) A new/revived junior level event was “boot strapped”. It was designed to be self-funded through player fees. Dubbed “Prospects Select”, players were entered solely on the selections of the coaches.
 - a. First year provided “reservations” to programs that subscribed early allowing us to know whether an event would come together or not.
 - b. Eagan offered their site to host the first-year event. Edina posed a backup location with a facilities-only offer (no volunteers). There were no other metro locations advanced to us as a host site.
 - c. Lack of volunteers in Eagan impacted the experience.
 - d. Weather forced a schedule adjustment with one game being cancelled on Sunday. Five of six games were played.
 - e. Despite the limitations, the baseball part of the event received positive responses with most of the organizers and coaches wishing to return and help develop the level.

- f. We had enough coaches at the junior event to cover it but by no means had it fully staffed with two coaches per team.
 - g. Junior players played in their home team uniforms.
- 6) Both all-stars and select were fully supported by our website and technical services.
- 7) All-stars was conceived as an event to draw college coaches to see Legion players and provide a visible presence that might demonstrate that Legion baseball events can provide exposure for what we hoped would be qualifying Legion talent. We had 24 college coaches attending NWU on Saturday and 8 attending on Sunday. Saturday featured four games and Sunday just two games.
- 8) The PBR/Legion showcase had 135 attendees – 30 from the senior all-stars and 35 from the junior group for a combined 48% of enrollment. The addition of the junior event appears to be 100% responsible for the growth in showcase numbers YOY.
- 9) The Coaches Breakfast had 125 attending, up from 80. The mix of attendees was 55% junior and 45% senior.

2023 Players Information

- 1) Senior Players
 - a. 102 nominations were received. 65 players were rostered from 40 communities.
 - b. 12 players were selected but needed to be replaced.
 - c. 32% (23 of 65) of the players came from Metro programs. One-third is substantially lower than any previous year.
 - i. More coaches reported they did not have anyone qualified to submit.
 - ii. More coaches said their top 24s and 25s were playing club.
 - d. There were 17 2022 all-star players eligible to be 2023 all-stars. Seven (7) returned.
 - i. One dropped for football. Two were eligible (on Legion rosters) but were not submitted. Seven from the metro (7) were not on a Legion roster in 2023.
 - e. 25% of the all-star players came because of our outreach efforts – Mike and Bruce calling and emailing targeted coaches usually about targeted players. Player recruitment appears essential to our event. Two individuals had volunteered to assist in the recruitment. Neither did so.
 - f. Email confirmation system increased efficiency but all confirmations were handled by one person – formerly three.
- 2) Prospect Select Players
 - a. 89 submissions came in with 62 players rostered from 37 communities.
 - i. 2 withdrew for club. 6 were replaced for family commitments. 4 replaced for state tournaments (Legion Junior D2 and VFW).
 - ii. 2 no-shows were from metro reservations.
 - b. 28 players came from the “early reservations”. 34 players came from open “nominations”.
 - c. 36 players were Metro – 60%. That should be expected as junior Legion coaches were most aware of the new program, a decidedly metro group.
 - d. Outstate programs play more VFW. Outstate players were typically rostered on their senior legion teams with many playing school varsity.

2024 Programming

This coming year should have some clear goals to further consolidate what is being recognized as Legion's All-Star Weekend. We should examine poll results and coaches' observations as part of our process.

- 1) Recognize that families regard this weekend as a complete baseball experience that allows them to tailor activities as they wish.
- 2) Each of the activities should be examined and improved such as:
 - a. The Twins night (if there is one) could include scoreboard or announcer recognition. Players could be entered into the critter race. Are there any other promotional angles?
 - i. Interestingly – parents would prefer to see their kids play on Friday night versus the Twins (75% of senior parents and 83% of junior parents). But less than half (44%) of senior players and 15% of junior players agreed with their parents. We should discuss – do we have Friday evening games in place of or coincident with the Twins game?
 - b. The PBR Showcase appears to be appropriately positioned. But time management is critical, and it should be timed to complete by noon, if possible.
 - c. The coach's breakfast is being refined somewhat: 1) It will start by 8:00 AM as most are in the lobby waiting to eat. Possibly open seating at 7:30 or 7:45; 2) Coach Dave Hieb will act as moderator and we will work together to develop more specific "curriculum" to make sure that there are clear take aways; 3) An earlier end will allow us to start the junior games earlier as the field has no lights; 4) Pricing must rise to \$20 as we will lose less money.
- 3) We will move the Junior event to Bethel University, a three-minute drive from NWU. The field features a turf infield with an estimated cost of \$1700. We believe that gate should cover the added field cost. NWU will provide concessions (their people, their food, their profits). NWU will provide two staff for announcing/scoreboard and Game Changer – at a cost. We provide ticket takers at our cost. Any volunteers we provide or can find would reduce our costs.
 - a. BU provides obvious logistical synergies – same hotel, same opening ceremonies, same staff support contacts, etc.
 - b. The turf infield provides almost as much weather insulation as NWU.
- 4) Player rosters, team numbers, and schedule.
 - a. We are planning to reduce team rosters to no more than 14 (from 16 to 17). Coaches, players, and parents have all contributed to that decision.
 - b. We plan to add a fifth team per level. Total players in 2023 – 65 per level. Total players per level 2024 - 70 per level.
 - c. By adopting a 5-team bracket, we can have all teams playing three games apiece although teams will not play every other team. The bracket does provide an optional championship game, but we opt not to play that round as only two of five teams would have a fourth game.
 - d. The five-team bracket has seven (7) total games versus the six (6) we had in 2023. That is one game of extra cost at each field.
- 5) Adding a fifth team will require a fifth set of jerseys. \$800 cost projection will be partially offset by \$300 that we netted from the sale of game jerseys in 2023.
- 6) College coaches came out strongly and seemed to have been satisfied. How can we encourage them to take in some game time at Bethel University with the juniors? Coach Hieb NWU offers us a Chick Fil A card to hand out on coach check in. We give them a free water at NWU and a free chicken sandwich at BU. Coach Hieb is coordinating with Chick Fil A.
- 7) Bolstering junior level is a priority. We have at least a few people that emerged in 2023 that want to help going forward- Jim Mulcahy (Perham), Soren Agard (Eagan), Scott Oberg (Tri City).

We must solidify and broaden coaching; promote and reach out to find qualified players (assuming that the goal is to highlight the quality); and develop additional funding sources. While we think the junior level should be more “developmental” than “all-star”, one would have to have the ability to have a secondary site for “overflow” players. Or one would have to re-think the Junior level in a way that would admit more player entries.

- 8) Improve the opening ceremonies. While nice, 2023 was not impressive. Ideas: 1) Get Todd to sing the anthem; 2) Get additional flags and larger honor guard presence; 3) Invite a dignitary (mayor?) for the first pitch; 4) Combine juniors and seniors in ceremony; 5) Bring the Mini Stars on the field, assign them to a place and team, and give them little flags to wave; 6) Get a more professional voice for ceremonies.
- 9) Connecting to communities.
 - a. It would be nice to connect with and possibly plug into the Roseville (Rosetown) and Moundsview (Tri City) communities. There may be resources and assistance that we just do not know about. We have proven to be efficient with our planning and execution. But help is welcome.
 - b. Our initial connection with the MBL community was crucial to 2023. However, we must recognize that there is friction at the 15- and 16-year-old level. The MBL is leaking 15 AAA teams as the common enemy of club teams is drawing off their better talents (not surprisingly) while the talent drain to clubs in Legion has simultaneously pulled better younger players up into Legion to fill out team rosters. Deterioration of Legion has the spill over effect for community travel baseball. It is a double whammy. So long as Legion and MBL (and similar organizations) approach the issues from their silos, the situation will only worsen. Hopefully there is reason for discussion. The option to discuss is really an option that resides at the MBL level. But the problems are common to us all.
 - c. Mini Stars Tournaments. Mini Stars Clinic (Coaches Clinic). We have the use of UNW for the weekend. That includes the football field and the softball diamond. We could host/run a four-team 10-year-old mini tournament on Saturday and an 11-year-old version on Sunday. Each day is a winner-winner and loser-loser format with every team playing 2 games each. Games have a 1-hour time limit – 5 innings. These events can be coordinated with the MBL (tourney and clinic) or coordinated with the local communities. We would need a ‘commissioner’ of sorts that is willing to contact the organizations and develop the concept. There may not be a better way to connect locally or to connect with the mission of the MBL. Note that the MBL will have finished its August Classic the previous weekend so there should not be any overlap in schedules. We do have at least one college coach that has volunteered to manage the clinic side of the equation. And we have the facility.
- 10) Funding is always a challenge. Mike has led the effort to date. And further modifications or expansions of our concepts and ideas will require some sort of financing. Does anyone wish to assist? Tria? Mayo?

The Poll – What Can We Learn?

- 1) We sent out a poll to the 2023 select and all-star players and parents. A poll is designed to get a representative sample. It should not be confused with a ‘vote’. The purpose was to gather information that might be useful in our event design as well as to point to or dismiss other directions or possible options. What would people like to see? What would they like to do? Would they like anything, more or anything different? If it was built, would they come? Should we drop something? Play more games or play games only? We have developed a weekend experience allowing players and families to pick and choose among several options. We polled

all-star and select players and parents. We had enough response (nearly 90) to believe we have a reasonable cross-section sample to work from.

2) **Our events according to The Poll: Overall message – they want to play more,** but tradeoffs between activities pose tough choices.

- a. **The Opening Practice** - Senior - 95% of parents and 85% of players find the practices valuable. Juniors somewhat less - 83% of parents and 75% of players. There is room for improvement, but the message is clear. Would they trade the practice for a game on Friday? Less than 35% said they would rather play a game than have practice. So, No. Just make practice even better.
- b. **The Twins Game Night** - Would they trade the Twins game for an all-star game? 75% and 83% of parents said yes – they want to see their kids play not the Twins. But players were only 44% and 13% (senior and junior) in favor of playing a tournament game versus watching the Twins.
 - i. **Comments** – The Twins game was a nice option with 180 seats sold. Parents and players have different viewpoints. Parents are clearly more hardcore than their kids! Twins night should not be cast in stone. It is possible to play two games per field after practice. Practice would have to start and finish sooner. There is extra cost assuming these would be plus games – added games.
- c. **PBR/Legion Showcase** – The showcase seems firmly embedded and is expected to be a part of the all-star weekend. Highlight the need to better plan the time slot as 50% of the attendees will need to get to Roseville by noon. Earlier start, more staff, less standing around? Friday morning has worked well and moving to Thursday may be a negative.
- d. **Playing 3 or 4 Games?**
 - i. Parents and players are split again on whether 3 games are enough or whether there should be 4 games. 75% of senior parents and 67% of junior parents prefer a fourth game. 54% of senior players and 25% of the juniors wanted another game.
 - ii. Our coaches are not split. They do not want a fourth game. They want smaller rosters so they can keep players on the field and do less juggling. They point out that there are very few pitcher-only types and no one wants to sit one third of the time. POs are more typical of metro teams and the flight of quality arms to club nearly eliminates the PO issue. Roster of 14 would be maximum and 13 might be preferable.
 - iii. Quality players, and we were loaded with all-conference players and some all-state players, do not want to sit half a game or a full game while coaches juggle the line up. Nor do players like being played out of position just to accommodate larger rosters.
- e. **Comments and Solutions** – There is a clear interest in playing as much as possible.
 - i. **A fourth game** with 4 teams adds two games to the existing 6 total games. Scheduling a fourth game is expensive and logistically challenging.
 1. The cost per game would be at least an additional \$1,000 for juniors and \$1200 for seniors.
 2. A fourth game would potentially require a Friday game or games. Costs could be offset with added gate revenue for the extra day.
 3. A fourth game with existing roster sizes does not address the concerns of the coaches rather it adds to their issues.

- ii. We can **Reduce roster sizes** by 2 to 3 players (versus 2023) to a maximum of 14 with 13 being 'permissible' which would have the effect of adding at least half a game of playing time to each player.
 - iii. We can **Play 8 innings (possibly 9)** games with time limits. Adding an inning to each game (3 total) is equivalent to adding half a game. A 9th inning has the effect of adding a full game of playing time.
 - 1. Umpires will charge more and field time at UNW would slightly increase. There would not be an added field cost at BU.
 - 2. Increasing innings increases pressure on the other parts of the schedule: breakfast, ceremonies, starting times.
 - 3. Scheduling the longer games is logistically feasible. NWU can accommodate 4 games Saturday with 3 on Sunday. BU would likely have 3 on Saturday and 4 on Sunday. The difference – lights.
- 3) **Player Demand and Teams** – The senior level had 103 nominations. The junior level had 90 in its first year. 130 of the nominations were placed, averaging over 16 players per team roster.
 - i. Staying at 4 teams: 13 max roster serves 104 kids; 14 max roster serves 112 kids – down from 130
 - ii. Adding a fifth team: 13 max serves 130, 14 max serves 140
 - iii. Added team increases expenses: jerseys, coaches, etc. Those costs are offset at juniors by player fees.
 - iv. A five-team bracket guaranteeing 3 games each (but no championship game) requires 7 games, up from six but less than the 8 required to add a fourth game to four teams.
 - v. Our two fields can accommodate the 7 games on Saturday and Sunday. Adding additional games would require another day.
- 4) **Fifth team and an added inning.** There are some competing views but common themes. We can get in more baseball with longer games and reduced rosters without breaking our budgets or reducing weekend options. Clearly, parents and players want as much baseball as they can get in. Games could be added on a Friday, but you should expect push back from our coaches. Adding one inning per game and cutting to 13/14 a roster has the effect of providing nearly a full “extra game” of playing time per player.
- 5) **Beyond the weekend** - asking the Poll. I wanted to know – is one all-star weekend the only thing, offering, or program that Legion players and families are interested in doing besides playing on their home community team. Do they want opportunities to play with players from other communities? What would they join or commit to?
 - a. **Playing in an existing club tournament the weekend after Legion All-Stars.** There already is such a tournament in its fourth year. We don't have to invent it. We can just plug in. Entry fee \$1400 plus coaches' costs, at least.
 - i. **Overall interest** – 68% 'yes'. 77% of senior players said 'yes'. You need 15 players out of a pool of 70.
 - ii. **Would you pay \$100 to \$150 to play?** – 70% yes.
 - b. **Would you want to play in two “all-star” level in season tournaments?** Overall, 2/3 said yes. 77% of senior players said yes. Legion season runs 6 to 7 weekends. There is no in-season program to plug into.
 - c. **Would you want to play one night a week on an elite Legion team?** Only 38% had an interest.

- d. **Would you want to play fall (August/September) ball in weekend tournaments?** 2/3 or 66% said yes. There already is an August/September program to plug into and/or supplement.
- 6) Bottom Line – higher end Legion players want more baseball and want more opportunities from and with Legion.**