

DNLL has three teams in action at state tourney

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It's another big weekend for Del Norte Little League as three local all star teams head off to compete in their respective Oregon Little League State Tournaments.

The 8-10 Softball All Stars have already kicked off their state tournament in Portland where it took on District 1 champion Beaumont in the first game of pool play. The 8-10 Softball All Stars will be back in action today at 9 a.m. playing District 2's Southeast Portland Little League.

Del Norte Little League Baseball will also be in action, starting today, as both the 10-12 All Stars and the 13-14 All Stars kick off state in Bend, Oregon. The 10-12 All Stars will open up play against the home team, taking on North Bend Little League at 8 p.m. The juniors will take the field at 11 a.m. against the District 3 champions.

Another Del Norte All Star team is set to bypass state and head straight to the Regional competition. The Senior Baseball All Stars were the only team of 15-16 year olds formed in the state of Oregon this year so

they will represent Oregon in the West Regional. The Senior All Stars will start play in the 10-team tournament on Thursday against the Arizona champions.

Junior Baseball All Stars

It will be the first time that the Del Norte Junior Baseball All Stars have taken the field as a team this summer after cruising through the District 8 Tournament without any challengers. That has left the team of 13 and 14 year olds with about six full weeks since the end of the Del Norte Little League season.

“We have been just practicing and trying to get as much live hitting, baserunning, and situations in the field,” said Junior All Star head coach Levi Thomas. “We are working on everything we can work on without having a game in six weeks before the tournament. That is going to be working against us with the other teams just coming out of districts, and we haven’t had a game in six weeks.”

Still, the Junior All Stars are confident that if they are able to shake off the rust quickly, they should be in a position to compete with the best teams in Oregon.

“We just need to get that first game down and get the nerves out of the boys. I feel like we have enough talent and the boys are strong enough to overcome that six-week deficit,” Thomas said. “Positionally we have strong players throughout the field, and we have a lot of pitching that we can depend on. I don’t feel like we are going to run out of pitching throughout the tournament.”

Another thing working for the Junior All Stars is their experience. Thomas said every player on the roster has previous experience playing in the Oregon Little League State Tournament.

“We have a majority of the team from the Major All Stars last year, with some added players from the previous team that went to state the year before, but they were a little too old last year,” Thomas said. “So with the combination of bringing that team together I think we have a really good shot at winning this tournament.”

Although the Junior All Stars have been forced to practice without playing for six weeks, Thomas said the players have managed to remain upbeat and engaged.

“They are a bunch of clowns,” Thomas said. “They play hard baseball and they have fun doing it. They joke around a lot and they take the game seriously at the same time. I think that is a really good feel for this team. The more fun they have while being serious about the game I think the better they will do, because it keeps them loose.”

After most of the players on the Junior roster this year made an exciting run to the championship game in the Majors last summer, Thomas said the team is hoping to go one step further this year and bring home the first Oregon Little League State Championship to Del Norte.

“I feel like we have the team to do it,” he said. “Overall I want the boys to have fun and I want them to play up to their potential. If they do those two things I have no doubt that they can win this tournament.”

Minor Softball All Stars

The Oregon Little League Minor Softball State Tournament had some last minute changes to the plans this year when the venue was changed to Normandale Park, which includes Erv Lind Stadium.

“It was going to be at a high school, but now we are going to be playing at Erv Lind Stadium, it was built in (1948), so it’s an old style softball stadium that has really cool sets of bleachers,” said Del Norte head coach John Horner. “It should be a great experience for the girls. It sits in a really pretty park in downtown Portland. It should be quite an experience.”

On Wednesday, Horner said he felt good about where the team was at, and how much work the players had put in since districts.

“We are excited,” said head coach John Horner. “After two weeks of practice the girls have done everything that I have asked of them, and they have gone above and beyond when it comes to giving maximum effort. I love to see that out of the girls.”

Although the Minor All Stars already played a state game on Friday, they are assured at least two more contests at the State Tournament because the Minor Softball State Tournament is set up a little differently than the other state tournaments that Del Norte teams are competing in. Rather than a double elimination bracket, the 8-10 age group is splitting up into two pools with four teams each. The top two teams from each pool will then play a single elimination tournament starting with the semifinals on Monday.

“With pool play you are guaranteed one more game than you are in any other bracketed tournament,” Horner said. “It gives you a little bit of wiggle room to have that one mishap game without it affecting your outcome down the road, which is kind of nice. But it is tough when you have two pools you never know who is going to be in your pool.”

Del Norte’s District 8 was placed in a pool along with Beaumont, Southeast Portland and Cascade/South Salem.

“The teams in our pool are mostly Portland-based. The teams that are in our pool didn’t have much of a district tournament so they will be similar to us in that aspect,” Horner said. “It will be a new experience for a lot of these kids. With Portland area teams you never know what you are going to get. Sometimes they are really good, and sometimes they lack a little bit. All we can do is control what we do, and we have really gotten better in the last couple weeks of understanding different philosophies and situational softball.”

Prior to the tournament Horner said the team’s main focus is to advance past pool play and reach the semifinals. That will likely require at least two victories in three games to accomplish.

“We want to make it out of pool play, that will be our first goal,” Horner said. “We want to have a good showing in that first game, knock off those jitters, and try to make it out of pool play. If we can make it to the final four teams in the State of Oregon that is quite an accomplishment. So the idea is to win two out of these three games at least, and make our way to the elimination rounds.”

Major Baseball All Stars

Last season the Major Baseball All Stars didn't know quite what to expect as they headed into the Oregon State Little League Tournament missing one of their star players. But after an early setback Del Norte put together an exciting run to reach the state championship game before finishing as the runners up.

"Crazy things happen in a baseball tournament and we just survived, advanced, and had a chance," said head coach Cris Rice, who is back coaching the Major All Stars this summer. "I'm really optimistic with this group, but I want to make sure they don't get too far ahead of themselves."

With three players back from the 2018 Major All Stars — including Preston Daniels, Collin Tromble, and Aidan Rice — and the rest of the roster filled out with players who have experience playing in the Minor State Tournament Del Norte's expectations are higher heading into state this year. But Rice stressed that the team's goal has to remain the same if they hope to attain similar success.

"We are only focused on that first game," he said. "I keep trying to remind the kids that we want to go up there, compete and win the state tournament, but we have to take it one game at a time. Our goal is to win that first inning, then win that first game, and set a tone. The first win is huge because it gets you into the winners bracket. It guarantees that you get three days up at the tournament, and you are one win away from a day off which is very important."

Del Norte has also had to battle a long layoff between games with the District Tournament taking place about a month ago.

"We are just trying to keep the kids engaged and busy during the time," Rice said. "That has been something that has been a little bit challenging because we have had so much off time. We have been doing some creative scrimmaging between our own team. I think the kids have focused and really done a great job."

In addition to scrimmaging against themselves, Rice said they have brought in some more experienced pitchers to give the 10-12 All Stars a taste of some higher-level pitching.

"We are trying to show them live pitching at speeds we will see at state — so a little bit better than the district tournament," Rice said. "We have had some guests come in with some former Warriors and other people coming in to help us. So the kids have seen a lot of different pitchers. That has been important. We have also spent a lot of time covering situational baseball and everybody moving without the ball. Just little things so that no kid is standing around and everybody is engaged in the baseball game."

Rice said the leaders on the team this year are the three players returning to the team from last year's runner up finish.

"They are three very important players for our team in hitting, pitching and fielding," Rice said. "They play important positions and they got to be there and see what it is like playing against kids who are one and two years older than them. They know what it takes to lose the first game and come back and win three games in a row."

While those three 12 year olds will be looked at to lead the team, Rice said there are a lot of serious baseball players on this All Star team.

“A lot of these kids are really dedicated to baseball — not just baseball for three months, but baseball for five or six months,” Rice said. “Several of them are doing that. It has been neat to see that there is a big commitment to being a baseball player within this group.”