

Sleepy Eye Legion seeks repeat as state champs

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SLEEPY EYE - One year ago, Sleepy Eye Legion Post 7 made a run at the DII Legion Baseball State Tournament, ending its season with a win to become state champions.

This season, Post 7 has a chance to do it again as they return to the state tournament with a 15-2 record and much of the same core.

"This time around, it's only going to be more difficult," Sleepy Eye head coach Zach Haala said. "We have a target on our backs, everybody knows that we're a good team, everyone's going to come after us in the state tournament. I think that our experience last year, we just got to really lean on the fact that we're a team that likes to fight. Our pitching is going to be good, we know that, but we're going to have to come ready to hit at the plate and we're going to have to battle."

Sleepy Eye will open the tournament at 4 p.m. Friday against New London-Spicer at Lions Memorial Park in Bird Island.

As for last year's tournament, Sleepy Eye has learned a lot from it and knows that elite pitching will not be enough to get them a second championship.

"Everyone we face is going to have a good pitcher," Haala said. "So going against them, everyone's strength is that. We can't just rely on our pitching, we have to play good defense, we have to be able to put the ball into play. Our experience last year, we learned that. In our first game, we only had one hit, and we won. I know, learning from that experience, our guys understand the challenge that it is and I think the core group that was there last year is going to be leaders when it comes to the other guys that weren't necessarily a part of it last year."

The good news for Sleepy Eye is that, when it comes to pitching, Sleepy Eye might still be ahead of the rest of the competition, even with everyone bringing their best in the state tourney.

"We have a number of guys that are quite honestly having dominant seasons," Haala said. "There are some guys that have stepped up when they weren't necessarily ready to pitch, guys that weren't expecting to pitch, and everyone just comes out and has pitched really well. I think that's a credit to our catcher too, to Caden Evers. Clearly he's calling good games, because no matter who we throw on the mound, they've been successful."

Sleepy Eye's main two guys on the mound this season have been Brandon Schmitz and Mark Anderson. Schmitz leads the team in innings (28 2/3), allowing just 18 hits with a 1.26 ERA on the season with 34 strikeouts and two walks. Anderson, meanwhile, leads the team in strikeouts with 38 while allowing 14 hits and a 1.21 ERA in 22 1/3 innings. Winsten Nienhaus figures to be the third man up, posting 19 strikeouts with a team-low 0.49 ERA and nine hits allowed in 18 1/3 innings. Cody Schultz and Marcus Martinez have also seen some significant time on the mound and could be options as relievers in the state tourney.

Another strength of the team this season has been their flexibility and ability to adapt to new situations.

"Guys are being put into uncomfortable situations and still performing," Haala said. "We've had a number of situations where we have guys gone for different reasons. Guys gone for hockey or a different game or have to work or whatever. Our lineup gets a little mixed up, we have to put guys into different positions that they aren't used to playing, guys hitting in spots of the lineup that they're not used to."

"Because we've got guys from St. Mary's and Sleepy Eye Public, the best of the best from each team. Maybe some of those guys are hitting leadoff for one team and now have to hit a little bit lower in the lineup for our team, and they've succeeded really well in doing that."

That flexibility can come in handy in a tournament where the team will have to play in three consecutive games. However, as it stands, Sleepy Eye will be coming into the tournament at full strength with all 17 players healthy and present.

"We should have our whole roster there, top to bottom," Haala said. "Which we haven't really had all year. We've had guys missing for Junior Legion or whatever reason. We should have 17 guys there at the state tournament ready to go."

Big contributors at the plate for Sleepy Eye this season include Evers, Anderson Cody Schultz and Jon Petermann. Evers leads the team in batting average and RBIs, hitting .390 18 RBIs and five doubles. The 2024 grad had a big impact last season during the playoffs for Sleepy Eye Legion, collecting clutch hit after clutch hit while being elite defensively as well.

Anderson is second on the team in batting average, posting a .375 with three doubles and a triple with 11 RBIs, while Petermann is hitting .352 with 22 total bases and 19 runs scored, both leading the team. Schultz, meanwhile, is the only player on the team with a home run this season. Schultz has proven he can go deep at any moment, hitting home runs in school ball, legion play and amateur baseball, all while hitting .341 for a solid all-around approach. Other offensive factors will be Talan Helget (.321 BA), Austin Uecker (.293 BA) and Arian Saenz (.288 BA).

While Sleepy Eye has strengths in many areas, one thing the team might need to shore up at state is their defensive playmaking.

"We have quite honestly not played to the best of our abilities defensively this year," Haala said. "I see that that can get to guys sometimes. If a guy has an error here, sometimes that will creep over into other areas of the game. They can take that out on themselves, then have poor approach at the plate in their next at-bat. Or an error happens in the field, and our pitcher gets upset and it affects how they go after the next batter."

"That's something that we're really looking to drive home, to make the next play. We want to focus in on our defense, try to play better on that side of things. Then when things do go wrong, we have to do a better job of letting it go, make the next play. Don't let that carry over to your next at-bat or carry over to your pitching performance."

Friday will be a new test for Haala and his team. Haala is unfamiliar with how NLS likes to operate, nor who the team might face on the mound.

Haala does know, however, that NLS is among the best competition in the state and will bring its best to take down the reigning state champs.

"I know they have one pitcher on their roster that's thrown a ton of innings for them," Haala said. "There's a good chance we could see him. I'm sure he's a good pitcher, looking at his stats and stuff, he's competed well all season. I'm assuming we'll face him, but you never know. Teams sometimes take the risk and pitch backwards, pitch three-two-one instead of one-two-three. I know they will be a good team, as is everybody in this tournament, but if we play our game, I think we have a good chance."

Haala is still deciding who to pitch in the first game of the tournament, but with the staff he has, he is confident that any one of them can go out and perform.

"It's going to be between Schmitz and Anderson," Haala said. "They've been our dogs all year long. Mark threw 110 pitches on Saturday, Brandon Schmitz threw a little bit for amateur that night and threw a little bit more on Sunday. So really it might end up coming down to who's arm is more ready to go. I don't think either of them is going to be a bad matchup. Maybe if I look into their team a little bit closer, I'd be able to understand who would be a better matchup for them. It'll be one of those two guys. You have to win the first one and go from there. Our pitching staff is deep, so really there's no wrong answer with who to throw there."