

Elrosa one win from state

by HERMAN LENSING
STAFF WRITER

The Elrosa Saints were in two of the most exciting games of the Region 15C tournament this past weekend.

Their 3-2 ninth-inning win over Regal on Friday, was followed by a 2-1 loss on Sunday to St. Martin. Elrosa is now in the playbacks. They are now either one win from going to state or one loss from the season ending. Elrosa faces Richmond Saturday at 1:30 p.m. in New Munich in a state-qualifying or elimination game.

Elrosa 3, Regal 2

Pat Illies' two-run ninth-inning home run gave Elrosa the win Saturday. The game was a pitching duel from the start. Ethan Vogt took to the mound for Elrosa and simply did not give up anything to Regal.

"Ethan kept us in it (the game)," said Matt Middendorf, who had two hits in the game. "We kept making mistakes and he kept us in the heroics by Pat."

Vogt pitched a complete game, scattering four Regal hits and walking four.

"We mixed in a lot of change-ups," said catcher Cody Eichers. "We threw off speed and he had a lot of movement. He was nipping the corners and we kept them off balance."

Elrosa knew what kind of team Regal had. Vogt had memories of last year's regional match-up with them.

"Last year they hit three home runs off of me on looping curveballs. I threw my

curveball harder this year. They had some hits, but we kept it to runs and got out of a couple of jams," said Vogt. "We gave ourselves a chance."

The Eagles had only one solid hit off of him. In the second inning, after a one-out walk, Chris Beier drilled a double to right field. Two fielders' choices later Regal had a 2-0 lead. The way Beier was pitching and the Eagles playing defense, that lead looked good.

Not that Elrosa hadn't had chances — the team, which had seven hits, got men on base, but then things went sour. The Saints hit into two double plays, one on a sacrifice bunt, and had two runners picked off.

"We didn't execute well," said Middendorf.

Even Elrosa's one-run rally in the seventh was tinged with "what might have been."

A walk to Vogt (who was replaced by pinch runner Derek Wiener) was followed by Kevin Kuefler being hit by the pitch. The Saints then had



PHOTOS BY HERMAN LENSING
above: Pat Illies is surrounded and mobbed by celebrating Saints as he touches home plate, giving Elrosa a 3-2 win in the Region 15C playoffs.

Matt Schmitz (center) waits for the ball to put out Regal's Nathan Meyer's steal attempt and end the first inning. Backing up the play is Matt Middendorf.

The Saints put a man on in the eighth, and again hit into a double play. The game seemed all but over when Beier struck out his ninth batter of the game for the second out with none on. Kuefler

kept hope alive with a double to left to bring up Illies. For Illies it was a second chance of sorts.

"I thought I had better make up for the botched bunt," he said. "I got lucky, they put the ball in there."

When Illies came to the plate, the Elrosa players and fans believed there was a real hope of possibly tying the game, or maybe winning it — unless he was walked.

"He was the number one guy, that is a no brainer," said Middendorf. "He is the guy you want up there. He is our leader."

With most fans expecting Illies to be walked, the decision to pitch to him had Elrosa fans on the edge of their seat. They got a bit more nervous when Illies fouled off a pitch that was almost caught, then swung and missed.

When he connected with the next pitch, it got quiet in the park as both Regal and Elrosa fans kept check-

ing the flight of the ball, the race by the right fielder for the ball and where the fence was. When the fielder stopped and, like the rest of those in the park, watched the ball sail beyond the fence. Elrosa then

started to celebrate.

St. Martin 2, Elrosa 1

ST. MARTIN — Aaron Vogt pitched one of his best games in the past few years, but Elrosa came up short in a 2-1 loss to St. Martin Sunday.

Vogt, who worked seven and-one-third innings, left the game with the score tied 1-1. That run was unearned. He had allowed only four hits and struck out five. Like the Regal game, the St. Martin game was also a pitcher's duel. The Saints took a 1-0 lead in the third inning on a RBI double by Matt Schmitz that scored James Kuefler.

A throwing error, one a sacrifice bunt attempt by St. Martin, allowed the Martins to tie the game in the sixth inning. They scored the game winner on a sacrifice bunt in the ninth. Austen Hadley was charged with the loss.

Elrosa 3, Regal 2

Regal 000 000 002-2 4 1
Elrosa 000 000 102-3 7 2

Elrosa: Matt Middendorf 2-3 bb, Matt Schmitz 0-4, Cody Eichers 0-4, Austen Hadley 0-3 bb, Ethan Vogt 0-3 bb, Derek Wiener r, Kevin Kuefler 1-3 r hp, Pat Illies 1-4 r 2bi hr, AJ Hadley 2-2 bb, Austin Imdieke 0-0, Ryan Illies 0-0, Jamie Kuefler 1-2. **Pitching:** C. Beier-L 8.2 7h 3r 2er 4bb 9k 2hb; Vogt-W 9i 4h 2r 2er 4bb 6k. **LOB:** Regal-5, Elrosa-5. **DP:** Regal-3, Elrosa-1.

St. Martin-2 Elrosa-1

St. Martin 000 001 001-2 6 0
Elrosa 001 000 000-1 6 1

Elrosa: Middendorf 1-4 d hp, Schmitz 2-5 bi d, Derek Wiener 0-0, Eichers 0-3 2bb, Austen Hadley 0-3 sf, E. Vogt 1-3 hp, K. Kuefler 0-4, Illies 1-2 2bb, AJ Hadley 0-3 r bb, J. Kuefler 1-4. **Pitching:** Aaron Vogt 7.2 4h r 0er 5k 2bb, Austen Hadley-L 2.2i 2h r er 2k hp. **LOB:** St. Martin-7 Elrosa-11.

Other Region 15C scores: Meire Grove-3 Richmond-2, Lake Henry-10 New London-Spicer-3, Meire Grove-3 Richmond-2, Regal-3 New Munich-0, Lake Henry-5 Meire Grove-2, Richmond-5 New London-Spicer 3.

Illies a Saints legend

In 1988, the Elrosa Saints went to the state tournament for the first time.

Since then, they have made six other trips to state. The 1988 season is unique among those trips. It is the only Saints team to play in state that did not have Pat Illies playing with it. Illies joined the Saints in 1989. For those who like interesting facts, it means he has had a hit in an amateur game in four different decades. He has played every position, been drafted by other teams, made the adjustment from metal to wood bats, and has always been a competitive player. But more than that, Illies has earned a reputation of being a clutch hitter. He is the man you want at the plate when the game is on the line — and will be decided in that at bat.

That's pretty much how most Elrosa fans felt late in the game against Regal Aug. 4 at Farming.

There have been a number of people across those years that have had more hits, scored more runs and more RBI. Few, however, have delivered as many hits when they were needed as has Illies. I've seen more than one game where he broke the hearts of opponents' fans, or at least threw a scare into them with an RBI hit late in the game.

One of my favorite state tournament memories was a few years ago when Elrosa was trailing by four runs and had been pretty much stymied for most of the game.



Mirrors of Smoke

by HERMAN LENSING

Late in the game the Saints had the bases loaded and two out; Illies was batting.

I was on the first base side of the game (because the sun was then behind me). It was also the side of the field where Elrosa's opponents were. One of their fans came up and asked "Can this guy hit?"

I told him the truth. "Right now, there is nobody Elrosa would rather have up than him."

"Think he can hit it out," the man asked.

"Against this pitcher, I don't know," I replied. "But I know he is clutch hitter."

While the conversation was going the count went full. I don't remember if there were any long fly ball fouls or not, but the count was full. With the payoff pitch coming in, all the runners broke and Illies swung at the pitch — and missed. But the catcher didn't catch the ball and everybody kept running. There were two missed throws by the opponents' defense and the play only ended with Illies being tagged out while coming home.

I was replaying what

happened to put it down in the scorebook when I heard a slight chuckle. It was the fan.

"You're right," he said. "He is a clutch hitter. If you can get in three runs with a strikeout, you are a clutch hitter."

I don't think Elrosa won the game, but I do remember it stayed closed until the ninth inning.

The appellation of being a clutch hitter has stayed with him over his career. Illies has gone from being considered a good young player, to a solid-season player, to a reliable veteran. Along the way he has become a friend, teammate, coach, manager and mentor to most of those he played with at Elrosa. But he was always known as a clutch hitter.

Opponents respect him in that role. He has more than once been walked with the game on the line, and sometimes with it only close to being on the line. He is, in short, one of the best to have ever played for Elrosa and in the SCL. But on Aug. 4 under the lights at Farming, he transcended any adjectives that had been used to describe him.

When Kevin Kuefler doubled it gave Illies one more at bat. He had already been up three times. Those at bats resulted in a pop out, fly out and hitting into a double play with a man in scoring position. Kuefler's double gave him one more chance.

In what was Elrosa's biggest game to date of the season, Pat Illies, with two strikes, connected with a pitch, sending the ball to deep right field and raising the hopes of Elrosa fans as it sailed farther and farther from home plate. When it landed Elrosa had a win — sealing Illies' title as a legend in Elrosa baseball.

Why sports matter

Next week Sauk Centre parents will sign their kids up for a fall sport as Sauk Centre High School and Middle School.

It might be one of the most important decisions they make in their kids' lifetime, as long as they are signing them up for the right reasons.

Too often parents get caught up in the glamour that sports brings. We watch it on television and see the big muscles and the big money. Television does a great job giving professional sports that Hollywood flair, always making the athletes seem larger than life.

That's how it was when I grew up. I wanted to be like Wayne Gretzky and Kirby Puckett and thought that one day I could be. And then I remember a conversation I had with my father. I was about 12 when he asked what I wanted to do when I grew up. I told him I wanted to be a hockey player or a baseball player.

He said, "but you already are one."

At the time I shook my head and said, "no, a professional."

Without totally bursting my bubble he said if that's what I truly wanted it would take an enormous amount of hard work and not to be disappointed if it didn't happen.

I did work harder, but with each passing year, it became more clear to me that those dreams would not come to fruition. And now as a father of three I understand why simply being involved in sports



by Bryan Zollman
In Other Words

is much more important than becoming a superior athlete.

Too often parents get caught up in their kids' activities. They want their kid to be the best player on the field, court or ice, when all they should want is that their child do their best.

They get caught up in the possibility that their kid will somehow be the next great talent and aspire to earn a college scholarship and perhaps play in the pros. But what is most important is that their child work hard at improving their individual skills so they can better help the team be successful.

They get caught up in jealousy when another child gets more playing time or has more success than theirs, when they should instead be grateful their child is on the team and able to reap the benefits being on a team brings, not only in their adolescent years, but later in life.

Yes, too often it's the parents that ruin sports for the kids. And then the kids don't want to play anymore.

When that happens they

don't get to experience why sports truly matter. In the end it isn't about the wins or the losses or who scored the most points or had the most hits. It doesn't matter who is all-conference, or MVP, or athlete of the year.

It's about the bus rides to and from games, the silly things said along the way that make everyone laugh. It's about a memorable play or game that they will talk about at weddings and high school reunions decades from now. It's about pre game meals and post-game get-togethers. It's about getting serious and everyone pulling in the same direction to reach a common goal. It's about picking each other up when they're down, overcoming adversity, and experiencing the thrill of triumph and the agony of defeat.

Too often we get caught up in what the end game is for our young athletes. Will he be the next high school superstar? Will she be the next Division I player?

In sports, the end doesn't justify the means. It's the means that matter most. It's the memories shared and relationships made that will far outlast any individual or team award. Trophies gather dust and are often stored away to never be seen again. But memories and friendships last a lifetime.

So if you are planning to sign your child up for a fall sport this year, make sure it is for the right reason: for them to simply have fun.

Titans season ends with 6-4 loss to Dent

by BRYAN ZOLLMAN
FREELANCE WRITER

The Sauk Centre Titans' season came to a halt Saturday when they were eliminated from playoffs following a 6-4 loss to Dent.

The Titans were coming off a split the weekend before where they beat Carlos and lost to top-seeded Fergus Falls.

Their game against Dent was close, but in the end the Titans couldn't mount a rally to overcome the 6-3 deficit

in the late innings and were eliminated in the double-elimination format.

The Titans scored three runs in the third after Dent had taken a 1-0 lead in the first. But Dent rallied for three runs in the bottom of the third for a 4-3 lead. It was a lead they wouldn't relinquish.

Tanner Schmiesing led the Titans with thee hits and three runs batted in. Brian Beuning was 2-for-3 with a walk and a run scored. Andrew Rousslange was

1-for-3 with a run scored and two walks and Andrew Primus had an RBI double.

The loss topped the Titans' record to 9-10 on the season, just below .500.

"It was an up and down season," said Titans manager Andrew Rousslange. "We had to deal with several games where our starters couldn't make it."

With a young core of players coming up, the team hopes to improve next summer.

All Sports Kickoff

Aug. 10 at 7 p.m. in the school auditorium for all athletes and their parents going out for any sport throughout the year.