

Hill Country American Legion Baseball Underway

“Citizenship through sportsmanship” was the motivation to establish American Legion Baseball in 1925. The quality required to play Legion Baseball is high and the selection very competitive. It has served as the path to the major league for many: the “Heater from Van Meter”, Bob Feller, the first American Legion player inducted into the Hall of Fame. More than 3,400 teams and nearly 55,000 youth participate in Legion Baseball from all 50 states and Canada.

After a year’s delay, American Legion Baseball is a reality in the Hill Country – the “Sliders” are playing soon! Mike Bankston, Army veteran and local coach for 18 years, applied his passion for the sport to finding sponsors, coaches, high quality players, equipment and supportive parents. Despite the cancellation of Legion Baseball in 2020, his players were still able to play in five tournaments, winning three. His recruiting area includes a zone from Uvalde to San Angelo.

Coaches in the area have been contacted to recommend their very best players. Bankston scouts them to determine if they possess not only the necessary talent and commitment, but understand the standards required to play Legion Baseball. His goal is to recruit 16 players. Must be 17-19 years of age and not turn 20 in 2021. Players must be committed and love the game as we hope it is a long summer.

There are 14 rostered players as of June 5: Carter Arrott (Ballinger), Ryan Avalos (Lakeview/Frank Phillips Junior College), Dalton Brown (Harper), Felix Cruz and James Sebera (Fredericksburg), Cruz Garcia (Homeschool Kerrville), Kaleb Gauna (Hondo), Austin Hander (Center Point/Vernon Junior College), Jake Herb and Thomas Pardo (Medina Valley), Kolten Kitchens and Luke Martinez (Our Lady of the Hills), Seth Michalewicz (Miles), and Patrick Price (Boerne Champion).

Retired Army Command Sergeant Major Virden of Ballinger has assisted with recruiting and Coach Ramirez of Our Lady of the Hills (OLH), Kerrville, has allowed the use of their field for practice. The Sliders coaches include Joe Martinez (Veteran, USMC) of Comfort who brings over 20 years of coaching experience. Garrett Price a former Boerne Champion player who now plays for Arlington Baptist University Patriots the past two years, completes the coaching staff. According to Manager Mike Bankston, the compensation for the manager and coaches is “seeing these young men grow in their sport and into stellar citizens and leaders”.

Sponsors and donations are critical to team existence and success. The following sponsors have been instrumental and the main reason American Legion Baseball has returned to the Hill Country: American Legion Post 208 (Kerrville), Sons of the American Legion Post 208 (Kerrville) Post 157 (Bandera) and Post 410 (Lakehills) and the South Texas Sliders (San Antonio, <https://southtexassliders.com/home/>) “Summer baseball becomes quite expensive with tournament costs, travel, hotel rooms, food, equipment, insurance and uniforms. We cannot thank our sponsors enough for their generous support,” said Mike Bankston, Manager of the American Legion Sliders.

The Sliders aim to win and win big. They will play in six warm-up tournaments before the State Tournament in League City July 20-25. If the Sliders win the Texas Tournament, then the American Legion will fly them to compete in Fairfield, CA for the Regional Championship Aug 3-8 where they will play other state champions for the right to compete in the 94th American Legion World Series in Shelby, North Carolina, August 11-16. It will be a demanding schedule and require amazing skill and teamwork, but there is a legacy to live up to also.

There are 81 players who made it into baseball immortality via Legion Baseball. For example, World War II and Korean War veteran, Ted Williams, was the American Legion Baseball Graduate of the Year in 1960: a 19-time All-Star. Here are a few of those 81 that may be familiar: Yogi Berra, Frank Robinson, Brooks Robinson, Willie Stargell, Reggie Jackson, Tony Gwynn, Tom Glavine, Greg Maddux, Joe Torre, Jeff Bagwell, and the late Roy Halladay. This Sliders inaugural team is confident and ready to follow in these giant professional and Legion Baseball cleats.

For more information or to be a sponsor, contact Mike Bankston at 830-796-7528 or amlegion157@live.com. Donations may be sent to Bandera American Legion Post 157, ATTN: BASEBALL, at P.O. Box 422, Bandera, TX 78003.