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33rd annual Junior League Baseball World Series starts next weekend in Taylor, Michigan

TAYLOR, MICHIGAN – The opening pitch of the 33rd annual Junior League Baseball World Series is scheduled for Sunday, August 11, at Taylor's Heritage Park.

The world's 10 best teams of 13- and 14-year-old ballplayers complete regional and national tournament play this week. They will arrive in town before colorful opening ceremonies at World Series Field at 8 p.m. Saturday, August 10.

Games begin at noon Sunday, August 11, and continue through the world championship game at 2 p.m. Saturday, August 17.

To date, four teams have qualified: the Asia-Pacific regional champions from Taoyuan, Chinese Taipei; the Europe and Africa champions from Brno, Czech Republic; the Latin America champions from Willemstad, Curacao; and the Puerto Rico national champions from Manati.

Those four teams will be joined in the International Pool by the national champions of Canada. The Canadian national tournament started July 31 in Lethbridge, Alberta, and continues through August 8. The seven-team field includes a host team, plus provincial champions of Ontario, Alberta, Quebec, Saskatchewan, British Columbia and the Atlantic area.

American champions

Five regional champions will play in the USA Pool.

The 12-team USA West regional got under way July 31 and continues through August 7 in Vancouver, Washington. In the hunt is a host team, plus state champions of California (north and south), Idaho, Alaska, Oregon, Washington, Hawaii, Nevada, Arizona, Montana and Utah.

La Mirada is the South California champion. The same league won the Junior League World Series 10 years ago.

Two regionals started August 2.

The six-team USA Southwest region in Albuquerque, New Mexico, features a host team, two champions from the state of Texas, plus the state champions of Colorado, Louisiana and New Mexico. The regional title game is scheduled for August 5. Last year's Junior League Southwest champions from the Oil Belt Little League in Corpus Christi, Texas, are in the tournament.

The eight-team USA Southeast region in Greenville, South Carolina, also began August 2 and continues through August 6. Two-time World Series champion Palma Ceia Little League from Tampa, Florida, is in the field, along with the state champions of Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia. The 2012 Junior League world champion came from Rockledge, Florida.

The other two USA regional tournaments are August 3-8.

The Michigan state champions from Midland are part of the 11-team Central region in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Joining them are a host team, plus the state champs of Ohio, Wisconsin, Indiana, Missouri, Kentucky, Illinois, North Dakota, Minnesota and Iowa.

The 10-team East regional tournament is in Freehold Township, New Jersey. Joining the host team are the state champions of New Jersey, Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Connecticut, Maryland and New York.

The 'older brother' of Little League

The Junior League World Series is considered the "older brother" of the more famous Little League World Series in South Williamsport, Pennsylvania. The Little League series attracts the best teams of 12-year-olds. When the players turn 13 and 14, they can play in Taylor.

Greg Bzura, the founder and director of the Junior League World Series, noted that all 10 teams that play in Taylor are already champions.

"In more than three decades, we have seen so many great teams and players," Bzura said. "Players have gone on to play professional and college baseball and other sports. We never know which players of today will become stars of tomorrow. We only hope they have a great time and make lasting memories in the time they spend in Taylor."

Current or past Major Leaguers who played in Taylor as teen-agers include former Detroit Tiger Gary Sheffield, Eric Bedard, Brett Myers, brothers Jose and Javier Valentin, Erubiel Durazo, Chad Hermansen, Derek Bell, Delino DeShields, Shannon Withem, Adam Loewen and Chris Brock.

Past Junior League standout Matt Cassel plays quarterback in the National Football League. Mark "Bo" Pelini played in Taylor, later was a safety with the Ohio State football team and is now head football coach at the University of Nebraska. Former teammates Chris Dingman and Steve Reinprecht went on to play in the National Hockey League.

International expansion

Bzura noted that the Junior League has really expanded in international lands. In July, the Latin America tournament in Aruba featured 12 teams: a host team and a national champion team from the homeland plus the national champs of Guatemala, St. Thomas, Venezuela, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Mexico, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia and, of course, Curacao.

The team from Aruba North Little League in Oranjestad came close to returning to Taylor for a second straight year, but lost in the Latin America title game to Curacao. Aruba played for the world championship a year ago in Taylor, falling 12-10 to Rockledge, Florida. About the same time, the 12-year-old team from Curacao was playing in the Little League World Series as the Caribbean champions.

Due to the popularity of baseball in Puerto Rico and Mexico, the national champions of one of those two countries gets an automatic berth in the World Series. Puerto Rico comes to Taylor in odd-numbered years; Mexico in even-numbered years. The team without the berth still has a chance to qualify for the World Series as the Latin America champ.

Teams from Manati, Puerto Rico, have played three times in Taylor and won the World Series in 1983 and 1989.

Teams from Chinese Taipei have represented Asia-Pacific in the World Series since the nation started entering Junior League teams in the regional in 2010. A team from Taoyuan, Chinese Taipei, won the 2010 World Series and finished runner-up in 2011.

This year, the Shing-Ming Junior Little League went 6-0 in the Asia-Pacific regional in the Philippines, outscoring five national champions by a combined score of 97-0. Hong Kong was runner-up. Other nations in the tournament were Saipan from the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Indonesia, India and the Philippines.

The Europe and Africa region was formerly known as EMEA (Europe, Middle East and Africa), but the Middle East is no longer part of the region.

In July, Czech Republic defeated Italy, 2-0, in the regional title game in Kutno, Poland. The two teams outlasted a U.S.-based military team in Germany and the national champions of Netherlands, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Romania, United Kingdom, Belarus, Germany and Moldova. Teams from Italy played in Taylor the last two years.

Saturday, Sunday and beyond

Opening ceremonies on Saturday night are open and free to the public. The night will include a parade of champions, the playing of national and state anthems, a presentation of dignitaries, a special ceremonial first pitch and fireworks.

Four games will be played Sunday, August 11, through Thursday, August 15. The International and USA championship games are scheduled for 4 and 7 p.m. respectively, on Friday, August 16 – which is an hour earlier than in the past.

The winners of the pool championships play for the world title at 2 p.m. on Saturday, August 17. The World Series finale will be broadcast live on www.espn3.com. A replay of the game on ESPN2 is scheduled for 2 to 4 p.m. Wednesday, August 21.

Admission to games is just \$5 per day per carload – or \$10 for the entire week. Both prices include parking.

Heritage Park is located at 12111 Pardee Road.

For more information, visit the website www.cityoftaylor.com/worldseries. To sponsor the World Series, call Director Greg Bzura at (734) 306-3113. Also, follow the World Series all year long on Facebook at www.facebook.com/juniorleagueworldseries.