

Four teams qualify for Junior League World Series in Taylor

Four international teams have qualified for the 29th annual Junior League World Series, set for August 16-22 at Taylor's Heritage Park.

All four teams have won regional championships and will join six other teams in the 2009 World Series for the best teams of 13- and 14-year-old baseball players.

The four qualifying teams to date are:

- Saipan of the Northern Mariana Islands, champion of the Asia-Pacific Region.
- Friuli Venezia Giulia, Italy, champion of the Europe/Middle East/Africa Region.
- Oranjestad, Aruba, champion of the Latin America Region.
- Yabucoa, the national champion of Puerto Rico.

The fifth international team will be the national champion of Canada. The Canadian national championship tournament begins August 6 in Langley, British Columbia.

The other five teams in the World Series will be United States regional champions. Qualifying tournaments will be held in New Jersey, California, Texas, Georgia and Indiana.

The team that wins the Michigan state championship in the 13- and 14-year-old division will play in the Central Regional Tournament starting August 8 in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Two of the qualifying international teams – Italy and Aruba – will represent their respective countries in the Junior League World Series for the first time. They bring to 22 the number of international countries to play in the JLWS.

On the other hand, the Juan Bibiloni Little League from Yabucoa, Puerto Rico, will be playing in Taylor for the seventh time. Yabucoa won the World Series in 1990.

This year's Saipan team will be representing its country in the Junior League World Series for the sixth time.

After the 10 teams arrive in Taylor, there will be opening ceremonies, featuring the parade of champions and fireworks, the evening of Saturday, August 15.

Then the squads will be divided into two five-team pools: International and USA. Each team will play four games in round-robin competition from Sunday, August 16, through Thursday, August 20.

The top two teams in each pool play for the International and USA championships on Friday, August 21.

The two pool championships play for the world title at 5 p.m. Saturday, August 22. The World Series finale will be shown live and later by rebroadcast on the ESPN family of networks.

The Regional Championships

All of the team playing in the JLWS arrive as champions.

Asia-Pacific Region: Saipan won the Asia-Pacific Regional championship on June 28 in Jakarta, Indonesia.

The Saipan all-stars emerged from the five-team region with a 3-1 record in pool play. They defeated Hong Kong, 19-8, and Indonesia, 7-4, and then lost to Guam, 6-0. A 21-18 win over the Philippines put Saipan into the finals for a rematch with Guam. In the regional title game, Saipan won, 10-9.

Saipan played in Taylor as the Asia-Pacific champions five straight years, from 2001 to 2005, but never won more than one game in any given year in the Junior League World Series.

The Asia-Pacific region at the junior level of the Little League World Series has existed since 1999, but only teams from the Philippines have won more than one game. In 2007, the Philippines all-stars went 5-1 and finished runner-up to world champion Pearl City, Hawaii. Last year, the Philippines team went 2-2.

"We look forward to welcoming back Saipan to Taylor," said World Series Director Greg Bzura. "This will be the sixth time, but of course they aren't the same kids. The Asia-Pacific Region is getting better, as evidenced by the fantastic performances here by the Philippines. I hope it continues to progress."

Europe/Middle East/Africa Region: The Friuli Venezia Giulia Little League won the regional championship by outlasting seven other national championship teams in a tournament that ended July 18 in Kutno, Poland.

In the championship game, Team Italy defeated a U.S. military team based in Germany, 6-5. It marked the end of a 6-0 tournament run for the Italian champions.

In pool play, Italy dominated the competition, defeating Belarus, 6-1, Poland, 21-1, and Netherlands, 19-2. The fourth win was a 13-3 conquest of Sweden in a cross-over game. In the tournament semifinals, Italy eliminated Lithuania, 7-1. Also in the tournament was a native Germany team.

The Junior League World Series is one of two international tournaments that will feature teams from Friuli Venezia Giulia. The league's 15- and 16-year-old team won the Senior League regional championship in a tournament played in Ramstein, Germany, and will play in the Senior League World Series in Bangor, Maine.

In Taylor, someone from Team Italy will plant an Italian flag on the Hill of Champions beyond the centerfield fence at World Series Field.

"It's a big satisfaction for us because the Senior team of our region won the regional tournament, too, so we have two teams in the states," said Diego Minio, a representative of the Italy junior team. "We are very happy and excited about this."

Italy may have its work cut out. Teams from the region that includes Europe have been coming to Taylor since 1990, when a team of players from U.S. military families based at Kaiserslautern, Germany, won one of its three games. For the next 11 years, no European team won a ballgame in the World Series. Then the JLWS expanded and switched from round-robin play to pool play. Since then, only one team – Kutno, Poland – has finished the tournament with a .500 record, going 2-2 in 2002.

Latin America Region: The Aruba North Little League all-stars from Oranjestad, Aruba, won the Latin American Regional Tournament in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico. Like Italy, Aruba will play for the first time in the World Series for the best teams of 13- and 14-year-old players.

To win the region, the Aruba North Little League all-stars had to defeat a team from Mexicali, Mexico, in its home country, 9-8, in nine innings. Mexico, which went into the title game unbeaten in the regional tournament, never led in the game but kept battling back to tie the score throughout the extra innings.

In pool play, Aruba opened with an 8-7 loss to Mexico and then won three straight over the U.S. Virgin Islands, 17-2; Dominican Republic, 13-3; and Costa Rica, 10-0. In a crossover semifinal game, Aruba defeated Guatemala, 8-2, setting up the rematch with Mexico. Also in the region were teams from Panama, Venezuela and the defending world champion Willemstad, Curacao, in the Netherland Antilles. Curacao wound up being eliminated by Mexico in the semifinals, 3-2.

The Latin American Region of the Junior League World Series was formed in 2000. Since then, teams from Venezuela and Panama have won regional championships three times each. Other Latin American champs have come from Mexico, St. Thomas of the U.S. Virgin Islands and Curacao.

Curacao (2008) and Panama City (2005) have gone on to win world championships.

Puerto Rico: A second Latin American team qualifies annually for the Junior League World Series. The national champions of Puerto Rico and Mexico alternate. Mexico played last year; this year, it's Puerto Rico's turn. (Mexico also could have qualified had the all-stars won the Latin American Region.)

This will be the 21st appearance in the JLWS for teams from Puerto Rico. The Juan Bibiloni Little League from Yabucoa has made more appearances in the than any other national champion from Puerto Rico. Its six appearances in Taylor came in 1984, 1986, 1990, 1998, 1999 and 2005. One resulted in a world championship (1990).

Teams from Puerto Rico have won five JLWS world championships – more than any other international region. A team from Manati became the first international team to win the world championship in 1983 and won again in 1989. A team from Cayey won it in 1993. Arroyo won in 1999. A team from Guayama played in the series two years ago, finishing 1-3.

Series Director Bzura noted that since a team from Puerto Rico has not won the world championship in 10 years, this year's entry may be "due." However, he also said the series can be won by newcomers as evidenced last year when Curacao defeated Hilo, Hawaii, 5-2.

By the way, the national champions of Aruba and Puerto Rico played for the Latin American Regional championship in the Senior League for players 15 and 16 years old. In that game, the Aruba South Little League defeated Yabucoa, 19-2, to qualify for the Senior League World Series in Bangor, Maine.

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