

# 2013 High School Team Of The Year: Harvard-Westlake

By [Nathan Rode](#)

The game of baseball works in funny ways, especially at the high school level. Just ask Harvard-Westlake, whose run to Team of the Year glory came one year later than expected.

The script for the private school in Studio City, Calif.—where it is sandwiched between Hollywood lots and million-dollar Beverly Hills homes—was written last year with two first-round picks on one pitching staff and plenty of national hype. But the storybook run never came. The staff ace was lost to injury and the Wolverines were upset in the postseason.



Jack Flaherty (Photo by Alyson Boyer Rode)

A year later, the pitching superstars—right-hander Lucas Giolito and lefthander Max Fried—were gone and their younger protégé, right-hander/third baseman Jack Flaherty, was left to lead a staff with modest experience and less punch. Add in nearly an entire offensive lineup returning, a young coach with a bright future, his own all-star staff, and a desire for redemption and the real script, the one made for the silver screen, was writing itself as Harvard-Westlake High marched to a wild win in the Southern Section championship and was ultimately named Baseball America's Team of the Year.

Most would write off a team that lost two first-round arms to graduation and not expect the team to compete at the same level, but Harvard-Westlake head coach Matt LaCour knew his team would be a threat offensively with most of his everyday players back and he was confident that the hard work everyone put in would pay off.

"I felt like this was a culmination of the past seven years of really hard work by our staff and our players—daily putting in the grind and trying to do things the right way with the hope that it would all pay off," he said. "This group of seniors, there's no transfers, there's no kid that just came in and made us better. It was just a culmination guys that worked hard together, that got better on a daily basis and at the end just became an unbelievable team in terms of trusting each other and quite honestly, teaching me as a coach how to trust players a little bit more."

The Wolverines hit .323 as a team, living up to expectations at the plate and on defense, consistently making the routine plays and executing on fundamentals. Junior Brian Ginsberg solidified the infield with his play at shortstop and on days he wasn't pitching, Flaherty strengthened the left side by holding down the hot corner. LaCour and his staff knew hitting and defense would be their strengths and keep them in games, but pitching is what would help the Wolverines get over the hurdle they failed to clear in 2012.

"Going into the year, we had two pitchers that we felt really comfortable with in Jack and Hans (Hansen)," LaCour said. "We knew what we were going to have in those two guys. But in order to get through our playoffs here and the grind of season, you need to have a solidified No. 3 guy, a third guy you can throw out there that can do a really good job. That was (right-hander) Conor Cuse for us. The strides he has made in the last 12 months, we haven't really seen as a staff in an individual player in our career."

Bouts of wildness and strong alternatives to him kept Cuse buried in the rotation through his junior season. He had the size, strength and arm to attract college recruiters, but no one was biting. But Cuse didn't let the lack of a college scholarship or the pressure of stepping up deter him. He made great advancements on the mound and after a strong outing in the National High School Invitational; Cuse was offered a scholarship to pitch at Stanford.

"That's what I've been working toward my high school career, but things didn't always work out in the beginning," Cuse said. "I had command issues and that's what has held me back. After I got enough

repetitions and confidence, it kind of clicked for me. I built up a lot of confidence over the winter and continued through the spring.”

Cuse had good examples to draw from, seeing the work ethic and competitive edge of Giolito and Fried firsthand, and didn’t hesitate to put the time in off the field to get better.



Arden Pabst (Photo by Alyson Boyer Rode)

“I always knew Conor was going to be good because he’s one of the hardest working kids I’ve ever seen,” catcher Arden Pabst said. “He’s always there before doing his exercises. He gets there before practice and stays after. I always knew that was going to pay off.” The work of Cuse and Hansen on the mound was a huge piece of Harvard-Westlake’s success, but Flaherty took his own step forward with his work as the team ace and No. 3 hitter. Thrust into the No. 2 role as a sophomore in 2012 when Giolito went down with an elbow injury, Flaherty polished his raw tools and athleticism in the months after the Wolverines’ disappointing finish.

“The thing about Jack is that he learns from things that are going on around him and he can apply it to his game,” LaCour said. “He learned from the preparation that he saw from Max Fried and Lucas Giolito. My biggest problem with Jack for the first two and a half years of his high school career were offensively he did not have the same aggressiveness that he had on the mound.”

That all changed after Harvard-Westlake returned to Cary, N.C., for the second edition of the NHSI. In 2012, the Wolverines lost to Southern California power Mater Dei High (Santa Ana, Calif.) and a rematch came to fruition. The Monarchs prevailed for a second straight season, leaving the Wolverines with a bitter taste in their mouths, a taste that would fuel the rest of their season.

“Getting out there, for this team building a new identity, was a big deal,” LaCour said. “I’ll be honest, losing that championship game, that lit a fire. We were ready to play, but that really just pissed us off. We played with a chip on our shoulder from that point on that was really fun to watch.” Flaherty took a turn at the plate, going from a passive approach to one that had him smoking balls to his pull side. His emergence with the bat set the stage for others around him like Ginsberg, Pabst, Joe Corrigan and Alex Horowitz to make noise offensively.

Harvard-Westlake won nine straight following the loss in the NHSI championship, stumbling just once more in the regular season. The Wolverines dropped a game to Notre Dame High (Sherman Oaks, Calif.), but LaCour encouraged his team to make the loss a positive development. They got one last look at what else they needed to do to win—before a loss would bring the season to an end—and focused on going on a seven-game win streak, which would end with a dogpile at Dodger Stadium in the Southern Section Division I final.

The Wolverines powered through the next six games, again getting big starts from Cuse, and found themselves warming up on a major league field, ranked No. 1 in the country and one win away from a national championship.

Like so many other games on their schedule, the championship against Marina High (Huntington Beach, Calif.) was a dramatic battle with Flaherty fittingly on the mound, stifling opposing hitters and driving in the game’s lone run. The story that is Harvard-Westlake’s run to a championship climaxed not with the final out of the seventh inning, but the one just prior.

Marina started the top of the seventh with a single and sacrificed the runner to second. The next hitter then roped a single through the left side and the runner on second made the turn for home. Approaching the ball in left field was Jackson Grayson, a sophomore who had been used as a defensive replacement for most of the season. The day before the championship tilt, LaCour protested Grayson's tendency to air out his throws from the outfield.

"I expressed my displeasure in Jackson Grayson throwing the ball air to air to every single base and how much I wanted to see him get on top of the ball and use one hop," LaCour said.

So as the Marina runner made his turn and Grayson lined himself up for the throw, LaCour and the rest of his team could only watch as he uncorked a strike to home plate where Pabst threw up a brick wall and the runner was cut down, two feet from tying the game.

"It was a perfect throw and it was bang-bang," Pabst said. "I was holding onto that ball for my life."  
"That was one of the best things I ever watched," Flaherty said. "With where I was positioned—I gave up the hit and went to go back up home—and I see Jackson come up and throw the ball. I looked and saw the runner coming. He was about halfway down the line and the ball was almost in Arden's glove. I thought, 'He's out and we're going to win this thing.'"

After a routine groundout to Ginsberg, the Wolverines stormed the pitcher's mound, celebrating the school's first-ever section title, securing the No. 1 spot atop the High School Top 25 with a 28-4 record and wrapping a story of hard work and perseverance that would satisfy any baseball fan.