

Around The Nation: April 14

Tampa's Jesuit continues to roll

By Nathan Rode (Baseball America)

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The perfect record that is Jesuit High's of Tampa was in danger in the season opener. The Tigers were leading 3-1 headed into the sixth inning at Catholic High (Tampa), but five errors allowed five runs to score and Jesuit was down 6-3 going into the final frame. But they managed to rally to begin the season 1-0.

The Tigers are now 19-0 and have catapulted to the No. 1 spot in the High School Top 25 poll. Head coach Richie Warren doesn't seem a bit surprised though. He sees every day what his players put into the game.

"Our guys consistently work hard," Warren said. "We have a lot of strong leadership from the senior class and the fact that they show up to the yard and work hard every day, the underclassmen have caught that and they get at it every day in practice."

Jesuit has four Division I signees—catcher Joe Hudson will attend Notre Dame next year, first baseman Greg Dupell is committed to Navy and shortstop Nick Lockwood will join teammate Jimmy Falla at South Florida—as well as talented underclassmen that can hold their own. The pitching rotation has two lefthanders in junior Daniel Gibson and Willi Martin, who has grown from a 5-foot-6 freshman to 6-foot-3 junior. Along the way he has also learned to cope with Type 1 diabetes, which the [St. Petersburg Times](#) highlighted in an interesting feature.

So, Jesuit has two strong starters that have been going deep into games, giving the bullpen rest. And the offense has averaged almost 11 runs per game. All the Tigers need is a closer that can shut it down in the late innings, which they seem to have found in freshman Lance McCullers, Jr., the son of the former big leaguer.

"He's a little different than most freshman," Warren said of McCullers. "He's well put together physically and mentally. He's been a great asset."

Because he's young and the closer, McCullers has been limited to four innings over five appearances, but he's struck out six those four innings while allowing just two hits. Gibson is 6-0, 1.35 in 41 innings with 47 strikeouts while Martin is 7-0, 1.30 in 38 innings with 32 strikeouts.

Still leading the offense is Hudson, who is batting .500/.600/.740 in 50 at-bats with three home runs and 22 RBIs. He's just excited to be along for the ride.

"Let me tell you," Hudson said. "It's good being a part of a program with tradition and history, but we're leaving our own mark. With the four D-I recruits—me, Greg (Dupell), Lock and Jimmy, we take it upon ourselves to make sure everyone's doing their jobs."

The Tigers have done the job so far and will have their depth put to the test with a tournament this week. But with their balance on both sides of the ball, Jesuit will look to stop the revolving door that has been the No. 1 ranking in the country.

National Derby

The 20th annual National Classic, sponsored for the second straight year by Anderson Bats, got underway with games on Monday and Baseball America's bird dog Dave Perkin is attendance. He'll be providing draft tidbits all week, but he first attended the lighter side of the tournament on Saturday, as he watched players compete in the home run derby.

LOS ANGELES—The 2009 National High School Classic began on Saturday, April 11 at El Dorado High School of Placentia, Calif. Long one of the premier high school events in the nation, this year's competition was inaugurated with a lively home run contest.

With Anderson Bats at the sponsor, all bats used by the contestants were sparkling new, thin handled Andersons.

"Are those metal bats or composite bats?" asked one dugout inhabitant. "Don't the composite bats have to be broken in?"

An El Dorado coach was direct in his reply.

"They're breaking them in now."

The home run contest was won by Roy La Face, a senior catcher at Notre Dame High of Sherman Oaks, Calif., alma mater of Florida Marlins prospect Mike Stanton. La Face has yet to hit a home run in a regular season game so far this season, according to Max Preps stats.

All told, La Face clubbed 13 bombs spread over three rounds to win the contest. His best shot cracked a light bulb in the left field scoreboard.

By far the most spectacular performance of the opening round came from Aaron Wirsch, a 6-foot-6, 205 lefthander/first baseman from El Toro High of Lake Forest, Calif. Tall and wiry in a Richie Sexson way, Wirsch employs an inward, corkscrewing, shoulder turning load mechanism followed by an uppercut swing that would make Mike Tyson envious.

Wirsch hit several breathtaking shots, clearing the center field hitting backdrop, the tall trees behind the left-field fence and the scoreboard.

Wirsch's teammate, infielder Nolan Arenado, also had an excellent opening round, belting five balls out of the yard, mostly to right field. Wirsch, Arenado and La Face were joined in the semifinals by Evan Mehl of Aptos (Calif.) High, Braden Warren of Spanish Fork (Utah) High, Danny Hayes of Carmichael, Calif.'s Jesuit High and Drew Ozanne of Scottsdale, Ariz.'s Notre Dame Prep.

La Face, Hayes and Ozanne hit their way into the finals, which was captured by La Face with 6 homers, compared to two each for his competitors.

Home run contests are entertaining for fans, but are taken with a sizable grain of salt by scouts. El Dorado's field is a bandbox, with a distinct jet stream flowing out to right field. High tech metal bats make it difficult to discern if the hitter blasting tape measure shots can replicate those efforts with a wood bat in his hands.

Home run contest swing mechanics can be, let's gently say... unusual. Hayes, a lefthanded hitter, displayed impressive power by simply flicking his wrists at pitches and driving them well over the trees onto the adjacent JV field.

However, as with many of his contest peers, Hayes' hitting style may not translate into wood bat game situations. He is extremely spread out at the plate, and his hands are positioned far back, beyond his left shoulder—a setup which may make it difficult to catch up to pitches in a game situation.

Nonetheless, home run contests do thrill the assembled fans and provide scouts with a worthy gauge of raw power. One scout sitting near me couldn't help but get caught up in the moment.

Taking a cell phone call during the contest, he dropped the traditional nonchalant scouts façade and excitedly told his listener, "You shoulda seen Wirsch! Over the trees! Over the hitting backdrop! Over the scoreboard! Man!"

-Dave Perkins