

High School Team Of The Year: Four Steps, Two Goals Drive Barbe To The Top

By Jacob Emert - *Baseball America*

Well before Opening Day rolled around at Barbe High in Lake Charles, La., head coach Glenn Cecchini had already drawn up his goals for the 2014 season.

When he discussed them with his players in a preseason meeting, the team decided those goals were theirs as well.

So the Buccaneers, ranked sixth in the national preseason poll, made the goals visible. In the locker room, in the dugout, in the Barbe Baseball Book each player was assigned on day one, there was the sheet of paper with season's goals in plain sight for all to see:

2014 State Champion.

2014 National Champion.

“People can say, ‘Gosh dang, that’s over the top. That’s really arrogant,’ ” Cecchini said. “But we really believe in goal-setting. You got to make your goals visible where you can see them every day.”

The Buccaneers had won Louisiana’s 5-A title six times before, most recently in 2012. But if the team was going to do something it never had before—win a national title—it realized early on the commitment and the dedication it would take.

It was then, when the goals were decided and dreams were visualized, that the four steps it would take to achieve them were laid out.

First, they would have to work harder than they had before.

In the past, biweekly workouts were canceled when weeks were filled with games. This year, that wouldn’t be the case. No matter the circumstances, the team participated in two workouts a week. No excuses.

The newfound resolve came on the practice field, too. Two drills done in every practice, one bunting and one fielding would never be less than perfect.

Twenty-one outs, a simulated defensive game, had to be completed flawlessly. One mistake and the counter reset to zero.

In one practice before the state tournament, the team reached 20 outs four times before finally finishing the drill.

“I mean, I love being at the baseball field, and I love practicing, but once you get to 45 minutes and you’re still doing the same drill it gets kind of frustrating,” said senior left fielder Beau Jordan, who has committed to play for Louisiana State. “Even if you’re frustrated though, you can’t get down. You have to tell your teammate, ‘Come on, man, come on,’ and pick them up.

“If you’re making the mistake in practice you’re not going to make it in games and that’s what it is about.”

It worked. The Buccaneers finished the season with a .974 fielding percentage.

The second step was to remain process-driven.

Hitting the ball hard, fielding a ground ball, making a pitch became valued over getting a hit, never making an error or striking each batter out. It was the reason individual stats were never posted.

“You can’t do it alone,” Jordan said. “One pitcher or one player isn’t going to get you to 39-2. That’s what we bought in to and what we sold out to.”

Then came learning how to deal with failure. When something negative would happen—though mistakes were rare for the 39-2 Buccaneers—the team adopted a “so what, move on” attitude.

Taking exaggerated deep breaths after letting up an extra-base hit, removing the helmet to let out all the negative thoughts after a bad swing or shaking out a glove after an error, every player was determined to not let the last pitch's outcome affect the next one's.

“At first it was a little uncomfortable,” senior shortstop Kennon Fontenot (Louisiana-Lafayette) said. “But everybody bought into it, and it worked. Once it started to work we all kept doing it, and it elevated our game even more.”

The final step was a spiritual one. Player-led Bible studies, pregame devotions, joint postgame prayers between opposing teams on the mound, all in an effort to remind the players how fortunate they were to be ballplayers.

It was a combination of these four steps, team unity and tremendous talent that led to the ultimate goal being realized: finishing atop the Baseball America/National High School Baseball Coaches Association national rankings.

Still, it wasn't a cakewalk to the championship. After losing two of its first 13 games, Barbe's chances of finishing the year as the top high school team in the country were falling fast.

“We wanted to be the first Barbe team to (win the national title). Early we dropped a couple games and we knew it probably wasn't going to be possible for us to win it all,” said Fontenot. “We just went out there, played our game.

“All of a sudden we hear that everyone else is losing one, two games. Then, when that national title was back in our grasps, we took off with it. We knew we were not going to lose again. That was our goal, and we achieved it.”

Beginning with a 9-5 win on March 15, which improved the team's record to 12-2, Barbe rattled off one win after another. By the season's concluding contest—a 7-1 victory in the state championship game over Live Oak—the win streak sat at 28.

It wasn't all smooth sailing for the Buccaneers, despite outscoring opponents 371-94, having a team batting average of .384, averaging more than nine runs a game, having a team on-base percentage north of .485 and a hoard of other video game-like statistics. Already in “can't lose again” territory, Barbe found itself trailing by a sizable margin against Comeaux High on March 27.

“We had our backs against the wall there. It was 6-1 going into the fourth or fifth inning,” said Fontenot, who also threw more than 100 touchdown passes as Barbe's quarterback. “We were just doing what we do. We didn't have a big meeting or a group talk. Somebody just got a hit, than the next guy did, and we kept rolling.”

Staying true to the four steps they had all bought into, Barbe scored 15 unanswered runs and won via the 10-run mercy rule, 16-6.

“That might be the best and deepest lineup I have ever seen from a high school team,” a National League scout said during the season. “I would put it up against any lineup in the country. Their lineup is led by a tremendous group of seniors and they are just a factory that produces ballplayers. I honestly think their current junior varsity team could win at least 20 games and advance to the third round of the playoffs if they moved up to varsity.”

Senior lefthander Gunner Leger (Louisiana-Lafayette) and freshman lefty Adam Goree combined to go 23-0 and toss 14 complete games, marching Barbe through the rest of the year and into the state tournament.

And they marched through that too, outscoring opponents 47-12 on their way to the championship game.

While the championship stage was no doubt a large one, it paled in comparison to one five Barbe players had been on six years earlier. As members of the South Lake Charles Little League team, Jordan, his twin brother Bryce (LSU)—who was the first catcher Cecchini ever allowed to call his own game behind the plate—Leger, Fontenot, and Nicholas Abshire made it to the 2008 Little League U.S. title game of the Little League World Series in Williamsport, Pa.

“I guess being a kid we didn't realize how big of a stage we were on,” Beau Jordan said. “But just the crowds and not being overwhelmed, that carried over to the state tournament. Knowing you have more than a normal group of people watching you. I guess that's the biggest part of it.”

Barbe fell behind Live Oak 1-0 in the first inning of the state title game with the 6-foot-3 Leger on the hill. By the time players flooded from the dugout and charged from their respective positions at game's end to meet in the celebratory dog pile, the Buccaneers rattled off seven straight runs and won 7-1.

One last time, the best team in the country—the one that didn't have a single player selected in the 2014 draft but decided before the season's first game they'd come together to do something remarkable—won in convincing fashion.