

High School Team of the Year: Stoneman Douglas High School

By Will Bryant – *Baseball America*

June 16, 2016

A 27-2 record speaks for itself, but that record is more impressive when accomplished without the team's star player.

This is the case for the Baseball America High School Team of the Year, Stoneman Douglas High in Parkland, Fla.

Coming into this season, Stoneman Douglas was poised for a deep playoff run. Led by senior draft prospects Jesus Luzardo, a hard-throwing lefthander, and third baseman Colton Welker, the Eagles were ready. But in his fourth appearance of the season their ace, Luzardo, injured his throwing arm. His season was done.

This was a tough pill to swallow for the Eagles, but co-captain Luzardo calmed the team's sails with a speech the day after his injury.

"He said, 'I'm goanna be fine—don't worry about me,'" coach Todd Fitz-Gerald said. "Go win a championship for me and for yourselves."

Luzardo was a true leader this season for the Eagles, even without taking the mound. Eventually a third-round pick of the Nationals, Luzardo came to every practice throughout the year and rallied the team through his words and actions. Through his attitude Luzardo inspired the whole team and gave them an added drive on the field.

"Our guys weren't going to let him go down without a ring," Fitz-Gerald said.

Welker added, "He always told us, 'I wish I could be out there with you,' and 'don't take it for granted.' We listened to him."

The team took these words to heart, becoming a close-knit unit throughout the season.

Coach Fitz-Gerald sees the camaraderie as a key component for the team's development of a winning mentality. From chilling out at home, to hanging together during class change at school, the team stayed close.

"These guys did everything together," Fitz-Gerald said. "They go into battle together, and never once worried or wavered or thought they were going to get beat.

"That is the mentality of a team with great confidence and character."

Filling Key Roles

Still, the coaches and players alike knew the challenges that would come without

their ace, but the goal of winning the championship was always there.

“Guys sold out, and bought into what we were doing,” Fitz-Gerald said. “I felt like we had all the pieces to the puzzle.”

One of the guys who bought in the most was senior utility man Joseph Bullion, whose primary role on the team was serving as a designated pinch runner.

“He was actually the guy who held our team together,” Fitz-Gerald said. “All he cared about was this team.”

Bullion, a four-year player for the Eagles, thrived in his pinch-running role. But it was his work on the days without games that made the biggest impact. Fitz-Gerald praised his work ethic and constant effort despite his modest role.

It all paid off for Stoneman Douglas and Bullion—the senior scored the winning run in each of the last seven games for the Eagles. “He’s the ultimate team player,” Fitz-Gerald said.

Of course, the Eagles had more than just role players like Bullion. They had stars like Welker, a fellow senior.

Following his lead, the Eagles strung together 16 straight wins to end the season on top of the 9A circuit. Welker, a fourth-round pick of the Rockies, led both by example and performance, by hitting a cool .500 this season to go along with six home runs and 24 RBIs.

“I just wanted to finish my high school career with a bang and keep the winning tradition going at Douglas,” Welker said.

In addition to Welker, the Eagles needed more players to complement Welker and make up for Luzardo’s loss if they were going to achieve the championship. One of the more notable among those was Brandon Kaminer.

Kaminer was thrust into the spot of ace this season, a big leap from the being the anchor of the JV staff his sophomore year. The junior flourished in his new role.

“Brandon is competitor, he’s fierce. I mean he shows no fear,” Welker said. “The work he put in showed this year.”

Kaminer went 12-0 this season, including a hard-fought 3-2 win over West Orange in the state semifinals.

“He took the role and ran with it,” Fitz-Gerald said.

Team Over Talent

Behind the spirits of Luzardo, the work ethic of Bullion, and stars such as Kaminer and Welker, Stoneman Douglas rose to the top of Florida high school baseball. Brady Norris was another hero, closing the semifinal win for Kaminer,

then tossing a complete-game shutout in the 3-0 state championship game win over Columbus High of Miami.

“It was either destined or meant to be,” Welker said. “But we got it done.”

The team rose to the top of Baseball America’s rankings after not being in the preseason top 50 ranking, thanks in large part to the support and motivation from Coach Fitz-Gerald.

“I pushed this team, cause I really think we’re deserving,” Fitz-Gerald said.

Fitz-Gerald is no stranger to coaching top-tier teams, having led American Heritage for 10 seasons in a span that included the careers of big leaguers such as Eric Hosmer, Adrian Nieto and Deven Marrero. He finds something special in this one, the first state title for the school in baseball, which is the alma mater of Cubs first baseman Anthony Rizzo.

“I’ve been doing this a long time man, but this is my most special year,” he said.

There has been little down time since the championship, with Luzardo and Welker being drafted in the third and fourth rounds respectively. But now a few weeks later, Fitz-Gerald can look back.

“I haven’t had time to sit back and reflect, and go over whole situation, but I can tell you this,” Fitz-Gerald said. “This was probably the best team I’ve ever had.”

He paused for a second, almost replaying the season in his mind.

“Not the most talented—but by far the best team I’ve ever coached.”