

# First Academy Rises To NHSI's National Stage

By **Clint Longenecker** (*Baseball America*)

The First Academy has made a name for itself in central Florida quickly. Now comes the chance for the private-school program to state its case on a national stage.

Although the Orlando-based school has lost several key personnel over the last year on and off the field, it is a program on the rise and features the top pair of prep lefthanders in the country, Adam Haseley and Foster Griffin, who will lead eight returning starters in the Royals' pursuit of the program's first state title and a National High School Invitational championship.

Seven seniors and four pitchers committed to Division I programs make the Royals poised for a run in Cary, N.C., during the last week of March. However, playing on the largest national stage for a high school program in 2014 seemed improbable at the start of the 2013 season.

Two days before the first game of the 2013 season, head coach and athletic director Darrell Don, the architect of the program who had been at TFA since 2005, resigned to take the athletic director position at Calvary Christian High in Clearwater to live closer to his ailing father.

"He was the coach that started with us in middle school and he was a father figure to all of us," Haseley said. "When we heard the news two days before the first game, we didn't really know what to think about it or how the season would end up. Thankfully, our assistant coach, coach Steve Segraves, had been there for longer than coach Don had been. So he picked us up right where coach Don had, which allowed us to have a great season."

The Royals went on to go 23-4 and advanced to the regionals quarterfinals. Longtime assistant coach, Segraves, had been at TFA since 1995 and filled the head coaching position. Segraves provided stability, as did senior Ben DeLuzio and a strong nucleus of juniors.

"DeLuzio, who was the captain and had been on varsity with coach Don since seventh grade, was the team leader," Griffin said. "His leadership and the team chemistry we had eased the transition. It all comes back to team chemistry, because we have had the same core group of seven guys together since we were in seventh grade. So whenever a trial hits you know that you have six other guys that will have your back."

DeLuzio, the only significant senior contributor on the team as the starting shortstop, became the second player drafted in program history, as a third-round pick of the Marlins. But he did not sign and is currently at Florida State, where he is off to a strong start as the Seminoles starting center fielder.

The program suffered another surprising loss during the summer, as rising senior outfielder Joey Swinarski, the team's home run leader with seven, elected to forgo his senior year of eligibility and enroll early at Mississippi State. Swinarski was a legitimate draft prospect with hitting ability and power potential.

Despite these losses, the roster has high-end draft talent, depth and emerging underclassmen for first-year head coach Scott Grove, who was hired in July and retained Segraves as an assistant.

Grove, who was the only coach at Timber Creek (Orlando) since the school opened in 2001, has more than 300 career wins at a .740 clip. His teams also had advanced to a state title game, and he's held in high esteem for his program-building ability.

"He has a legacy of establishing high-quality programs," athletic director Patrick Barrett said. "He worked constantly with the younger students to develop his players. He has a long track of player development and program development. From a player development standpoint, he is very impressive. When he came in, he presented me with a strategic plan on player development for the program detailed by each position. He is a strategic planner and that is what makes him great."

His program created a pipeline to college baseball, as Grove said more than 90 percent of his players at Timber Creek went on to play at some level of college baseball or pro ball.

## **Pitching-And-Defense Club**

Grove, who pitched for six seasons in the minors, is known for developing strong run prevention teams, which fits the current roster. The Royals return 84 percent of their innings pitched from last year and all but one of the six pitchers who threw more than 12 innings, giving TFA the pitching depth to traverse the trials of four games in as many days at the NHSI. The staff combined to strike out 8.6 hitter's per-seven innings.

Haseley is a Virginia commit who can sit 88-91 mph with his fastball that has considerable arm-side run, touching 92. The 6-foot, 176-pound Haseley has a loose arm, solid slider and struck out 12 per-seven last year. Haseley, also an outfielder, is a gold medal winner for USA Baseball's 18-and-under national team, leading the World Cup in batting average (.484/.515/.800). He has bat speed and above-average straight-line speed.

Griffin, a Perfect Game and Under Armour All-American, has a big, long-limbed and projectable body at 6-foot-3, 200-pounds. The Mississippi commit can touch 94 and sits 89-93 with sink and has a pair of off-speed pitches that could be at least average. His breaking ball has improved to an average future pitch and his changeup shows the makings of an above-average pitch, flashing plus. Griffin has vaulted into the discussion in the top two rounds of the draft with his development this spring.

This duo will likely double the number of players drafted in TFA history.

A pair of junior two-way righthanders committed to Furman, Chadwick Word and Peyton Hopkins, are starters who can run their fastballs into the high 80s, according to coaches. The staff leader in innings, senior righthander Thomas Headley, also returns after posting a 1.75 ERA with nearly a strikeout an inning.

The coaching staff believes the eight returning starters will make the defense an asset.

For a pitching-and-defense team, the Royals provide offensive thump. TFA hit a combined .337/.446/.544 with a .207 isolated slugging and 88 extra-base hits in 27 games last year. It had only two positions without returning starters: shortstop, which was filled by transfer Nick Gavin, and right field, which Griffin occupies when not pitching. Sophomore catcher Cody Orchard has the potential to be an impact player and senior first baseman Kyle Connell will continue his playing career as a preferred walk-on at Maine.

## **Big-Name Fields**

TFA is an exemplary program beyond its pure on-field talent and host to the Payne Stewart Athletic Complex. The world-class professional golfer, whose children attended TFA, created the vision for one of the premier multi-sport athletic facilities in the state, donating a large sum and encouraging others to do the same shortly before his death in 1999.

The baseball field is named Orel Hershisier for the former Dodgers great whose children attended TFA and features collegiate style locker rooms. The Major League Baseball Scouting Bureau uses the field to conduct tryouts.

Kroy Crofoot Field, the football field, annually hosts college football teams in Orlando for bowl games. This year Crofoot Field hosted presumptive first-round pick Teddy Bridgewater and Louisville, who played in the Russell Athletic Bowl.

"The way the athletics are set up, TFA is similar to a college program with having a sports information director, a strength and conditioning coach and putting the games on TV," Grove said.

Royals TV provides a streaming broadcast of most Academy sporting events.

TFA student-athletes are known for their excellence on and off the field as a premier academic institution. In the last few years, reading and math scores at TFA have ranked in the top one percent in the nation and TFA won the academic state championship in 2011.

"Our athletic facilities demonstrate that we truly do pursue excellence in every area, as do our academics," Barrett said. "This pursuit of excellence carries over to our coaching staff, players and our baseball program has great structure. We are incredibly excited for what they are able to do this year." The next test comes in the NHSI. By all indications, The First Academy is up for the challenge.