

# Hamilton High Finds Early Success In Arizona



By **Nathan Rode** (*Baseball America*)

The Phoenix area isn't short on baseball programs that have collected multiple state championships and produced college and professional players.

And if schools like Scottsdale's Chaparral and Horizon High are among the fathers of high school baseball in Arizona, then Hamilton High of Chandler is the teenager still unable to drive. The Huskies could also be considered something akin to child prodigies, however, with the success they've already had.

Hamilton High opened its doors in the fall of 1998 with no senior class and only a couple hundred juniors. Since the inaugural season on the diamond in the spring of 1999, the Huskies have won three state championships, placed second three times and reached the semifinals twice.

"Our philosophy is about competing," head coach Mike Woods said. "In those first years, we just wanted to compete. If we could get our kids to play hard, keep fighting and competing and give the best effort at all times, facing adversity, good things will happen. If you play the game the right way and respect the game, good things will happen. And they have."

The first season went as expected for a new program, with Hamilton posting a 5-24 record. But that has been the Huskies' only losing season. Woods kept all of his freshmen together for that first season and moved them up to varsity in 2000. They went 17-14 that year, broke the 20-win plateau in 2001 and haven't won fewer than 20 games since.

Hamilton is a steady contender in a region known for having schools beat up on each other throughout the season, and now it will bring its show east to the USA Baseball National High School Invitational, March 27-30 at the USA Baseball National Training Complex in Cary, N.C.

## **Birth Of A Winner**

A Rockford, Ill., native, Woods moved to Arizona in 1984 to play junior college baseball. He got into a teaching program and started coaching, and from 1986-98 he coached the freshman team at Chandler High, as the town's population exploded. Chandler added nearly 70,000 residents between 1990-98, thanks in part to job opportunities created when Intel built a plant on the edge of town.

"We have like a little Silicon Valley about two miles from Hamilton," Woods said.

The swelling population eventually led to the creation of a new high school, and Hamilton High was born. Woods got the job as head baseball coach and instilled his philosophy of competing and playing hard with his staff and players.

"We took our lumps on the varsity level that (first) year," he said. "The next year, the freshmen moved up to varsity and the ball got rolling. It all started with the class that graduated in 2002. They were the first to go through four years of high school."

The 2002 class was made up of the freshmen who started together during the first season, and they led Hamilton to a regular season title and tournament championship in the Fiesta Region on the way to an appearance in the state semifinals. Their first state championship came in 2003, with a repeat in 2004. And even though the town continued to grow and more high schools opened, Hamilton's success

continued.

“We have an open boundary state,” Woods said. “You can go to any school you want as a freshman. Once we got up and running, we had that early success and two new schools opened up in our town. By the time they opened we were doing well. We just kept getting the players. We’ve been real fortunate and the benefactors of a lot of talent.”

Don’t confuse an open boundary rule with the ability to recruit players. There are rules in place to prevent coaches from influencing players to come to their school. They have to be careful with involvement in local leagues, and bringing kids to campus is prohibited. The early success certainly attracted young players to Hamilton, but Woods says its continuation is a result of a supportive and enthusiastic community.

“It’s a baseball town,” he said. “We had a core baseball community, and when all the people moved in here it just kind of took off. “Our Little League program has sent a couple teams to Williamsport. A lot of those kids have come our way. It’s been 20 years of Chandler just blowing up. We do well in a lot of sports, not just baseball. Our football team is incredible.”The Hamilton program has benefited from Chandler’s upper-middle class demographic and a thriving youth baseball program. Four players on Hamilton’s current roster—first baseman/leftlander Cody Bellinger, outfielder Skyler Palermo, catcher Kyle Pechloff and infielder Connor Woods—went to the Little League World Series in 2007, and 10 players teamed up to win the 2009 Babe Ruth 14-and-under World Series.

### **Stay Together, Win Together**

The amateur baseball circuit is flooded with tournaments, showcases and camps all claiming to give the exposure needed to play at the next level—for a price, of course. Through the growth of travel ball, Hamilton has stayed true while friction between high school and travel coaches builds as they tell parents what’s best for their child. Woods sees that and does his best to keep it simple for players in his program.

“We’re real big on our kids playing together,” he said. “In the summer when everyone is pulled different ways, we still play together. Some kids still get to go do special events. We’ve had those guys and I tell them, ‘Hey, that’s awesome, go to that.’ But they always come back. We look at their schedule and our schedule. They make it when they can. I’ve never had a problem with our elite athletes big-timing us.

“I tell them respect is a two-way street. I’ll respect their choices and they respect the other guys around here. It hasn’t been an issue and that’s a real credit to their families as they see the big picture.”

Developing a successful program like Hamilton’s has allowed Woods and his staff to expect the best, both on and off the field. His players have talent, but they also come with a strong work ethic and are held to high standards of behavior. Woods’ son Connor has been around the program since it started and knows this better than anybody.

“I knew from an early age what it took to be great because I watched all the great players come through,” the younger Woods said. “Watching them I figured out what work ethic it took to be to be successful so I took that into my game. You have to work hard even when you think no one is watching because someone always is. If you’re not working hard, your competitor is going to outwork you and take your spot.”

This year’s team is no different than those from the past and expectations remain high. The Huskies’ last state championship came in 2008, and they’re eager to win again.

“With Hamilton, you never go under the radar and you expect to go far in the tournament,” Bellinger said. “It’s a lot of pressure, but the team we have this year, we’ll be pretty good.”

Woods believes his team is as good as any he’s had the last 10 years, but that’s on paper. With the loss of Mitch Nay, the 58th overall pick in last year’s draft, Hamilton isn’t as power-laden as before, but six other starters are back and the lineup will be led by Bellinger, who was the team’s top hitter in 2012 with a .447/.528/.689 line, four home runs and 31 RBIs. He is committed to Oregon and will get support from Pechloff and Palermo, who were also among the top five in hitting last year.

On the mound, the Huskies will have to get by without Partick Murphy (Oregon), who went 5-1, 2.66 in

50 innings last year and had Tommy John surgery in July. But Hamilton has 96 more innings back, mostly from right-hander Sean Rackoski (5-1, 1.20; Kansas) and lefthander Tyler Erwin (3-1, 2.06), a Grand Canyon (Ariz.) recruit.

“They expect to contend for the championship,” Woods said. “We expect to be there at the end of the year. That’s the way we feel. If we don’t get it done, it’s on us. I have a great group of kids that know the game.