

American Heritage rides 14-game winning streak to state, national titles

By Nathan Rode (*Baseball America*)

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With the attention that American Heritage High (Plantation, Fla.) has been given this season, readers can relate to the bludgeoning that the Patriots put on opponents this season. They stormed through the regular season, knocking off just about every 6-A Florida school they faced, capturing the school's first 3-A state baseball title as well as a national championship.

The Patriots can add one more title to their resume: Baseball America/BCA Team of the Year.



Eric Hosmer

American Heritage started the season ranked No. 4 in the country, the lowest ranking the Patriots would see all year. They took over the top spot in the April 1 rankings with a 15-1 record (the lone loss coming to Stephens County (Ga.) High in the LaGrange tournament against righthander Ethan Martin).

"There were a couple tough games," head coach Todd Fitz-Gerald said. "The game against Stephens County was tough. It was about 40 degrees and we had to turn around and face Ethan Martin."

It was that night Martin shot up draft charts as a righthander rather than a third baseman, still hitting 94 mph on radar guns more than 100 pitches into the game.

But Fitz-Gerald's crew made it interesting and gave Stephens County a run. They scored four runs in the final three innings, coming up just short, 6-4.

"The way we came back and battled," Fitz-Gerald added, "I knew we had a special group."

Before the next rankings came out, American Heritage lost to Palm Beach (Fla.) Central High, a 6-A opponent, 4-3, dropping them to No. 2 in the country as Tupelo (Miss.) High remained undefeated. They returned to the top on April 29 and held fast, riding a 14-game win streak all the way to the title, something that was barely ever discussed.

"We had talked about it at the very beginning of the season," Fitz-Gerald said. "We really wanted to shoot for that No. 1 ranking and thought it was within reach. Then they refused to talk about it until after they won state."

American Heritage blew through the playoffs, scoring 79 runs in eight games while allowing just 21. Catcher Adrian Nieto had the game of his career in the finals and first baseman Eric Hosmer fell a home run short of the cycle. Nieto went 2-for-3 with two home runs and five RBIs in the 8-2 clincher, while Hosmer was 3-for-3 with an RBI and three runs scored. And the final out couldn't have been more fitting. Hosmer, the team's closer, took the ball for the final inning, striking out the side and igniting a celebration with his catcher and friend, Nieto.

"It was just a fitting end, with him making the final pitch to (Nieto) and them being the first to hug each other," Fitz-Gerald said. "I was so excited I ran out there to hug someone, but I looked like I was hugging air."

One knock against American Heritage's season was the quality of its opponents, being a 3-A school with a weaker conference schedule. Fitz-Gerald and his team did everything they could to dispel that. Their only two losses came to Palm Beach Central, last year's National Classic champion in California and a formidable 6-A program, and

Stephen's County, whose ace was ultimately drafted 15th overall by the Dodgers. Every other win came against teams they were supposed to beat and plenty of bigger schools. They also no-hit Cullman (Ala.) High 10-0, the back-to-back 5-A state champions (2007-2008) and preseason No. 26 team.

The Patriots produced four picks in this year's draft: Hosmer (third overall, Royals), Nieto (fifth round, Nationals), righthander Juan Carlos Sulbaran (30th round, Reds) and outfielder Joey Belviso (50th round, Angels). The rest of the lineup has several Division I signees and underclassmen that will be sniffing the prospect rankings in the coming years. That's a team that deserves the comparisons to a junior college team, a statement echoed by several coaches and scouts throughout the season.

Ranking Roundup

The 2007 national champion and preseason No. 1 Wilson High (Long Beach, Calif.) lasted just one month at the top before hitting some bumps. The Bruins dropped their second game of the season to Anaheim's Katella High 3-1 and lost their No. 2 pitcher, righthander Ray Hanson, to a broken thumb. Their No. 1, two-way, prospect Aaron Hicks, was also battling a stiff back, ultimately challenging Wilson's depth.

The Bruins couldn't quite return to the top, finishing the season 28-6 and losing in the CIF Division I Southern Section finals 4-1 to Simi Valley (Calif.) High. They ended up No. 14 in the country.

"I think we had a very good season in spite of a couple things," head coach Andy Hall said. "We felt we could have repeated if we got through those early tournaments. It was cool to go back to Dodger Stadium for the championship though. Last year was such a blur. We went twice in two years. Some never get there so we never discount that."

Plano (Texas) West High enjoyed a dominant season, starting the year outside of the rankings, only to storm to the top with a 35-game win streak and perfect regular season (28-0). Their first loss came in the Region II semifinals to Cedar Park (Texas) High, but the Wovles salvaged the third game to advance. Georgetown (Texas) High took the first tilt of the region finals, but Plano West took the series and went unscathed in their final four games to win the 5-A championship with a 40-2 record, an incredible feat in Texas baseball.

"We're really on cloud nine," head coach Kendall Clark said. "Back in January we thought we had the best lineup, but didn't know what kind of pitching we had. This was such a focused group and these guys were determined to win. It's been a blur, but a grind at the same time. We are exhausted. The coaches are, but the kids aren't."