

Hucks Gets Lexington (S.C.) High Program Back On Track

by Nathan Rode (*Baseball America*)



Brian Hucks, center (Photo by Alyson Boyer Rode)

Without the benefit of recruiting, it can take time for a high school program to return to the winning ways it was used to before losses started piling up. Lexington (S.C.) High won three 4-A state titles and was a runner-up once in the 1990s, but had just one runner-up finish in the 2000s. During the 2011 season, in which Lexington went 10-15, head coach Tommy Mishoe decided he would step down so the Wildcats were in the market for a new leader.

So they turned to Brian Hucks, a four-year starter at Lexington in the 90s and the head coach at Brookland-Cayce High (Cayce, S.C.). In 12 seasons, Hucks led the Bearcats to two state championships and had built a reputation as being one of the best coaches in the Palmetto State.

When offered the Lexington position, Hucks jumped at the opportunity to return to his high school.

"It was a chance to go back home," Hucks said. "I didn't know I would ever want to leave BC, but I wanted a new challenge and direction in my life. I wanted to grow as a coach and I felt like I had done what I could do with BC."

Hucks' Brookland-Cayce team had played Lexington so he was familiar with its players. He wondered what he was getting into when his team took advantage of fundamental mistakes by the Wildcats, but when he arrived he saw that he had something to work with.

"When I came in, I found not only were the kids talented, but they were hungry to something different," he said. "They wanted to be successful and they were embarrassed about what the program had become. From day one, they completely bought in."

What they bought into was a high school program being run like a college one. Hucks stressed the importance of fundamentals and made sure practices were intense, so the players were competing every day. He kept an open line of communication with the coaches, players, parents, scouts and college recruiters. Hucks even has someone serve as the sports information director, who is responsible for scoring the games and sending out postgame information to the necessary people. Everything about the program was unlike most high schools.

The only thing that wasn't like a college program was the coaching staff. Lexington has 10 coaches for three teams, a situation that allows Hucks to focus more energy on overseeing the entire operation.

The approach paid off immediately. After going 10-15 in 2011, Lexington went 27-4 in 2012, missing an appearance in the state finals by one game. In 2013, the Wildcats are off to a 14-3 start, including a 2-2 showing at the USA Baseball National High School Invitational. The record may not stand out, but their on-field performance certainly did. They had the game-tying run at third and go-ahead run at first with one out against Mater Dei High, the No. 5 team in the country at the time and now No. 1. The nine-hole hitter, Cody Smith, hit a line drive down the third base line that was snared by Ryan McMahon as he was pulled toward the bag to double off the runner. Mater Dei survived as Lexington saw a potential winning hit turn into a game-ending double play.

But the Wildcats bounced back with a win over San Diego's Cathedral Catholic High, which had junior lefthander Brady Aiken on the mound, a high priority follow for scouts in 2014. The Dons were No. 3 at the time and were edged 2-1. Lexington dropped its final game to now-No. 19 Hamilton High (Chandler, Ariz.) 6-2.

The Wildcats returned to South Carolina to pick up key district victories, including a 3-2 win against South Aiken High (Aiken, S.C.) that gave Hucks 300 career victories.

Open Doors

When Hucks speaks of his time as a coach, he notes that he's most proud of how many of his players have gone on to play at the next level. He's closing in on about five dozen and has been coaching since the 1999 season.

"A big part of that is we promote our program and promote our kids," Hucks said.

That's where the SID comes in. Tony Ciuffo, the father of catcher Nick Ciuffo, spent 23 years in media relations, mostly with the College of Charleston, and hardly knows how to watch a baseball game as a fan or parent.

"It's the only way I know to go to ballgames," Ciuffo said. "You do it for 23 years as a job and I don't know any other way to go to the ballpark."

Ciuffo's job as a high school SID actually started at his son's previous school, Wando High in Mt. Pleasant, S.C. When Nick Ciuffo moved to Lexington with his mom, it meant Tony would have to drive two hours each way to see him play. Not that he needed it, but Hucks gave him a little extra motivation to make the trips and asked him to be the SID for Lexington.

"I have a responsibility to that program," Ciuffo said. "My job is to get that information out as quickly as possible and accurately."

"Every week I try to do a little wrap-up with notes. Not a lot, but something. I just want people to know. And Coach Hucks wants to run his program as close to a college one as he can."

People outside the program appreciate the information, especially the scouts. Nick Ciuffo is a potential first-round pick for the 2013 draft so scouts are at every game. Information from high school coaches can be hard to come by for scouts. Some coaches simply aren't adept at using e-mail or keeping up a constant flow of information. It's hard to blame them as most high school coaches might see a player like Ciuffo come through their program once a decade. Hucks and Tony Ciuffo make sure the scouts have the information they need at the beginning of each week and if something changes, they are notified in a timely manner.

However, it doesn't stop there. When scouts run down players in the spring, they can often run into games that move slowly because of the level of play. As they wait for their target player to come to bat or make a play in the field, the downtime in between can drag on. But Lexington plays at a level that helps the scouts maintain their focus and they come to the park knowing they will see a highly competitive game with few fundamental mistakes.

"When the game starts, it's more of an advanced atmosphere," an American League scout said. "You're not watching kids do dumb things. You're not watching a kid and saying you're going to have to teach him a bunch of things. That whole environment seems more advanced than your typical high school atmosphere."

"They're very business like and college-esque in their approach and it makes it easier for us to go watch and evaluate. You're not sitting through seven long innings of baseball." You're actually watching seven innings of competitive, high-energy baseball.

Lexington also consistently takes a full-length batting practice, something that can often-times be abbreviated or cut out of a high school schedule. And even though the scouts are there to see Nick Ciuffo, every player gets their fair share of cuts and no favoritism is shown.

"The communication has been outstanding," the scout said. "And it hasn't been one of those things where it separates Ciuffo from the group, which I think the kids on the team appreciate. When you go there it's not like Ciuffo hits for seven rounds and everyone else takes two. It's a full length BP where everybody is getting work in and everybody is getting better being a part of the whole system."

"That's the one thing I'll say about them. In this day and age of everything is showcase baseball and all about the individual kid, you can tell they're one of the few teams that actually play like a good team. They have that type of approach to the game. They're going to go out and do everything they can to win and the rest will take care of itself."

Lexington is taking care of business so far this season, standing at 15-3 and entering the High School Top 25 at No. 20 this week. Once on a path of mediocrity, the Lexington baseball program has quickly risen to competing at a national level. They may be high school aged, but if you get out to see the Wildcats play, don't be surprised if you mistake them for something older.