

Team  **Watching**



Wilson High School
Long Beach, California

Seniors Lead Wilson High To Team Of The Year Award

By Alan Matthews
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If high school seniors prepared for exams the way they do the prom, we'd all have brought home straight A's. For generations, it's been the school year's most anticipated occasion, but for 11 seniors on the Wilson High baseball team, prom night carried significance for a much different reason this spring.

On the night when their peers reveled in their last hurrah together, Elliot Glynn and his teammates sat around a table at senior first baseman Chase Kaesman's house, dressed in tuxedos, and rather than soaking in the celebration of the evening, turned discussion to the task ahead.

"It was a pretty passionate conversation," said Glynn, the team's co-captain who delivered an emotional speech that night. "The day before, we had won our first-round (playoff) game. I had never been part of a team that actually won a playoff game, and we ended up talking about how much we wanted to keep it alive, just win."

Which is precisely what the Bruins went out and did, earning a pair of come-from-behind victories the following week before polishing off the season with a 5-1 win over Anaheim's Canyon High at Dodger Stadium to claim the California Interscholastic Federation Southern Section Division I championship.

Wilson (Long Beach, Calif.) entered the final week of the season as the No. 1 team in the country, and finished as the top team in the Baseball America/National High School Baseball Coaches Association Top 50 poll, becoming just the second California school in the 15-year history of the poll to finish No. 1.

"Senior leadership was the backbone of this team," said Andy Hall, a 20-year coaching veteran, including seven years as the head coach at Wilson. "When you hear stories like that, for those guys to be thinking about our season rather than the prom, that's pretty special.

"This was the finest team I've coached."

A Year In The Making

With an enrollment of approximately 4,400 students and an athletic department that has produced former major leaguers Bobby Grich, Jeff and Sean Burroughs as well as a summer Olympian in every Olympics since 1956, including a handful of record-setting swimmers, Wilson has long been a hotbed for standout prep teams. Last year was no exception, as the Bruins got off to an 11-3 start before losing eight of their final 16 games in 2006.

The tailspin was underscored by selfishness and dissension, not a lack of talent, and it left Hall with a sour taste.

"I remember telling them that, 'if we have another season with all of the non-baseball related stuff, next year will be my last as your coach,' " Hall said. "After the meeting, Glynn came up to me, put his arm around me, and assured me that next year would be different.

"Those (seniors) did a great job on that level. We were a great team because we had great players who cared about each other."

With last year's implosion behind them, the Bruins opened the season ranked No. 6 in the Preseason BA/NHSBCA poll, and again got off to a strong start, advancing to the championship game of the season-opening Loara Tournament in Orange County.

There, they squared off against another nationally-ranked team in Cypress (Calif.) High, which boasted the nation's best high school hitter in senior third baseman Josh Vitters. Cypress won 9-6, but the tone for the season had been set.

"It set us back a little, we were pretty down about it," Glynn said. "And we said, 'we're never going to be the bridesmaid anymore.' "

Wilson rolled off an 11-game winning streak before dropping its second game of the season, this time to nationally-ranked Thousand Oaks (Calif.) High 7-4 in the Lions Easter Tournament, which featured five games in three days. But after a late-April setback in a rematch against conference rival and defending CIF Southern Section champion Lakewood (Calif.) High, which was ranked No. 4 at the time, Wilson never stumbled again, winning its last nine games and marching to the top of the CIF's most competitive section (California doesn't have a state playoff).

Along the way, the Bruins defeated a third-round draft pick in Simi Valley High senior righthander Nicholas Barnese, and then held a second-rounder, El Modena High first baseman Freddie Freeman, to 0-for-3 with a walk.

Traditional power Esperanza High was the hottest team in the region entering the postseason, and after knocking off Lakewood, Esperanza drew Wilson, with a date at Dodger Stadium on the line.

The Bruins found themselves on the ropes once again, falling behind 1-0 and again 3-1 before rallying in the bottom of the seventh to pull out a 5-4 win that Hall likened to, "one of those football games where whoever had the ball last was going to win."

Complexion Of A Champion

Hall knew his team was built for success, and during its rigorous schedule, watched it develop the resolve it needed to match its ability. With Glynn stepping to the front of the rotation, as well as the clubhouse, all the other pieces fell in place. Junior Ray Hanson was the perfect complement to Glynn—a righthander with power stuff to go with Glynn's feel and command from the left side. Hanson went 9-0, 2.16 and led the team in innings (71) and strikeouts (77) while Glynn added nine wins and 72 strikeouts with 19 walks in 68 innings.

Kaesman and senior catcher Tyler Albright provided the heart of the order with thump, and senior second baseman Pat Radford reinvented himself, improving his approach at the plate tenfold from last year, to provide the lineup with balance.

But when the Bruins weren't out-executing their opponents, they could rely on superior talent with senior shortstop Ryan Dent and junior center fielder Aaron Hicks, who doubled as the team's closer.

Dent was one of the nation's best middle infield prospects who, before being drafted in the supplemental first-round by the Red Sox, capped his four-year varsity career with a .468 average, seven triples, 28 stolen bases and a mind-blowing 30-7 walk-strikeout ratio.

Hicks might be drafted higher than Dent next year. He was 44-for-45 in stolen bases, posted a .370 average and went 3-0 with three saves and 27 strikeouts in 19 innings on the mound, running his fastball up to 94 mph.

Junior third baseman Zach Wilson (.379-3-33) has already verbally committed to Arizona State, and Albright (.346-1-24) is headed to Harvard to play in the Ivy League next year.

Glynn is also bound for the East Coast, and says he has no plans to sign with the Devil Rays, who drafted him in the 46th round, opting instead to pitch and play outfield for Connecticut.

As news spread about Wilson's national ranking, the buzz in the community heightened. Each of Wilson's playoff games were packed with hundreds of fans, and eventually the team brought home Wilson's fourth CIF sectional title, the first since 1957. Four times in the last nine years, Wilson played for the section title, but came away empty each time.

But this year's edition would not be deterred from the task at hand, and can now make up for celebration time lost along the way.