

A Team



Watching



American Heritage High School
Plantation, FL

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.

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.