Five years ago, the historic run to the Little League World Series by a dozen Lafayette All-Stars provided local fans with...

Players, coaches still awed by trip's impact

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Just before Hurricane Katrina dominated the headlines in late August 2005, there was an All-Star team with 12 players: 11 on 12 years old and three coaches. What was the talk of the town.

The postseason that summer began with a talented team hoping to win the state tournament on its home ballpark in Broadmoor Boulevard. It ended with all 12 players meeting the president of the United States, enjoying a surprise visit by one of the world's most famous athletes in Shaquille O'Neal and then by playing a little baseball on national television in northeast Pennsylvania.

All the while, baseball fans, young and old, were back home cheering on the only Lafayette team to ever reach the Little League World Series in 60-year history of the event.

The Lafayette Little League All-Stars played four action-packed contests in Williamsport and came home to a hero's welcome after reaching the U.S. bracket semifinals.

"I still don't think they realize how special of an accomplishment it was," LLL head coach Mike Mcdonald said. "I think it's going to hit them when they're about 22 years old."

The Lafayette All-Stars captured the imagination of the many fans back home with a cardiac style of play. First was the three runs in the bottom of the sixth inning for a 3-2 win over Westbrook, Maine, with Connor Toops knocking home the game-winning run.

Even today, almost five years later, Toops can hardly believe he delivered in such a big way in such a big situation.

"I was in such shock that I did that," Toops said. "I guess nobody expected me to do that, but I did. I didn't think anything after it happened. I was still in shock. I didn't know what to think."

Then came a seemingly insurmountable deficit of 8-1 to Owosso, Ky., in the second game, only for the local All-Stars to rally for four runs in the third, and then a second straight three-run sixth inning for a dramatic 9-8 come-from-behind victory.

COMPLETE COVERAGE INSIDE

- Then and Now: What the Lafayette Little Leaguers were thinking in 2005 and now in 2010.
- Dan McDonald: The 2005 trip to Williamsport, Pa., remains the most unique sports trip of career.
- Where are they now? Find out the impact that each of the 12 players have made on their high school teams.
- The journey remembered: Players recall most memorable aspects of their trip to Williamsport.
- With the 12 players spread between three high schools, many of these talented teammates are now high-school rivals.
- A step beyond: Some have left baseball behind for more success in other sports.
- Boys of summer: Photos from 2005.
- Lafayette's Little League All-Stars waited in the dugout for their names to be announced during the ceremony honoring the team at Tiger Moore Field on Aug. 29, 2005 — one day before Katrina hit land.
Summer

A 9-3 loss to Rancho Buena Vista, Calif., left the Lafayette All-Stars at 2-1 in pool play, but the next game proved to be a loss as well to Hawaii in the U.S. semifinals.

"At the time, things were moving so fast between practice and the games that it really didn't sink in," assistant coach Mark Toups and Connor's father said. "Over the years, you've been able to reflect back and realize what we did. It was special."

"People still mention it to me from time to time if they recognize my name. It's great," said Mike Conrad. "They remember my son more than me."

For one, Brenn Conrad, who was the starting third baseman on Lafayette High's Class 5A state finalists, couldn't believe the experience. "It was unreal how many people were following us," he said. "It surprised us to know that so many people were following us."

And while the team's celebrity status has obviously faded away five years later, it's certainly not forgotten.

"I don't think a week has gone by since then that somebody hasn't brought it up to me, Jace (Conrad) or Brenn," coach Mike Conrad said. "They still talk about it."

Indeed, the names are virtually household names in baseball circles, even today.

"Some people still see me and said 'That's the guy who played in the Little League World Series,'" Connor Toups said.

"Still today when Brenn, my Dad and I go into a restaurant sometimes, people we've never talked to in our lives still come up to us and talk about it," Jace Conrad said. "At the time, I would have never guessed that anyone would care five years later. That's just amazing."

"Every once in a while, it comes up in a conversation and it brings back all the memories," said Tyler Douglas, who is the starting second baseman for Lafayette High's state finalists. "I've watched it on TV since then and I just can't believe I was there."

As much fun and as many memories as the team's trip to Williamsport and the area, coach Conrad said most fans have forgotten exactly how close the Lafayette All-Stars came to not even getting out of the district tournament.

"Going into that particular year, we knew we had a pretty good group in the 11-12 age group," coach Conrad said. "We felt pretty confident that something special might happen. What we didn't know is how good the Evangeline Little League (out of New Iberia area) was going to be. We didn't beat them until the second elimination game."

"I'm convinced that if they had beaten us that they would have played in the World Series. They were that good."

What followed was the state tournament and two wins over South Lake Charles.

"We certainly had respect for the program at South Lake Charles, but we had heard that they were a little down in talent that year by their standards," coach Conrad said. "We beat them 2-1 in the first game and then had a little easier time with them in the finals."

That earned the local Little Leaguers a trip to Waco for the regional tournament that was spiced by a visit from President George W. Bush, who threw the first pitch to Lafayette catcher Jordan Romero.

Romero said he doesn't have to wait until he's an adult to truly relish the entire experience.

"I appreciate it right now," he said. "Not too many people get to do that in their life. It's special."

"Watching the first pitch from the president, that was real cool."

As it turned out, it wasn't the baseball games at all that the players remember the most these days.

"I remember everything about that trip, like it was yesterday," Brenn Conrad said. "It was amazing."

"I had no idea that we'd go as far as we did, I knew we could do it," said Sammy Scofield, who is currently a two-sport star at St. Thomas More. "We came up just a little short. It was an unbelievable experience."

"I guess it makes us all role models for younger kids, giving the dream that they could go there one day like we did. It pretty much fulfills the thing that you can do whatever you want as long as you try hard and practice."

Since then, nine of the 12 players have continued to pursue baseball. All of them have contributed to state playoff winning or district championship teams at Lafayette High, St. Thomas More or Acadiaana.

"It's been a lot of fun to see the kids grow and improve their skills," coach Conrad said. "Five years has gone by pretty quickly."

"Nine of the 12 are still playing baseball and have been successful. That's really a tribute to those kids."

For some, though, it's always going to be hard to beat the summer of 2005.

"I just remember all the fun we had," Connor Toups said. "Personally, I don't think anything is as big as that was, other than going to the College World Series or the Major League World Series. That's as big as it gets."

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Page 1, Sec D
July 25, 2010
Column 1