

## Big Red Machine is Ready for Battle

By Greg Schmidt

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For only the third time in the 16-year history of Tri-City Red the team is returning 10 or more players. In all, 11 players are returning for 2005. The record is 12 in 2002. That broke the previous high of 10 in 1999.

“Usually we’re at the seven or eight level . . . it really helps on the experience side,” said Red skipper Jeff Larsen, in his eighth season. It also helps, historically, in the win column.

The Red finished 38-13 in 2002 and 64-5 in ’99. Both teams reached the state tournament and of course the ’99 squad didn’t stop until it claimed the Legion World Series title. However, unlike those teams, this year’s veteran group struggled mightily at times in the previous season, so much so, that the squad finished below .500 at 22-23. “I didn’t look at the record,” said Larsen, noting the Red’s incredibly difficult schedule. “We’re a team that was pretty competitive. As we were going through, we built a lot of depth.”



That depth led to a strong finish capped by the Fourth District playoff championship and state tourney berth.

“We were prepared for the playoffs,” Larsen said, adding, “it’s a big deal to get to the state tournament from [the Fourth District]. It’s always a dog fight to get there, with six games in six days. I thought we responded really well.”

The Red boasts their most intimidating cast since '99 with five players 6'2" or bigger. From L to R: Derek Moen, Adam Weber, Blake Searles, Seth Rosin and Sam Weber.

Unfortunately the hot streak was put on ice by the huge window between the district playoff final and the state opener. The Red was eliminated in three games.

“Once you take a break after taking a week off, it’s hard to get back and get in the swing of things,” said catcher Brady Field.

Outfielder Billy Gazich agreed: “In baseball especially . . . We were in a groove at the end of the [regular season] and that time off can really take the wind out of your sail.”

That gap has been eliminated this year. Fourth District Director, George Bodlovick, has moved the playoffs back a few days. The champion will be crowned a mere four days before the start of the state tourney instead of a week.

In order to stretch the season a bit further, district teams will meet three times instead of two. Said Larsen: “We need to be playing — that way you’re ready to go right into state. Us, as well as the other teams will be better prepared.”

Reaching the state tournament for the 10<sup>th</sup> time in 16 seasons is among the many goals for the team's quartet of third-year players: Field (.270 batting average, .384 on-base-percentage) and tri-captains Evan Eid (.299, .434), Mark Ries (.273, .429,) and Gazich (.265, .462).



Third-year players. Front L to R: Billy Gazich and Evan Eid. Back: Mark Ries and Brady Field.

“We have a lot of important spots returning like [shortstop] Derek McCallum and the outfield and some great pitchers coming back, some really key players,” said Eid.

Added Field: “I think we can do it again. We know what it takes to get there.” They also know, that being third-year players, they have more to do than just playing the game.

“Since we were named captains, [Gazich, Ries] and I have the extra responsibility to make sure everybody is upbeat, involved and working hard. We take it seriously and we want them to,” said Eid.

Added Ries: “I know it’s hard in your first year and now, being a third year player we need to show them how Red baseball is and make sure they feel accepted and that they feel like they’re part of this team.”

All of that — while still managing to keep their eyes on the prize.

“With our returning players we pretty much have the confidence that we can beat anyone in the state,” Gazich said.

They’ll get their chance.

The Red again boasts the most the intense schedule of all their district counterparts. Along with that tradition also comes the challenge of facing a team that’s better rested — and able to throw their top pitcher more often than not.

That isn’t a concern for Larsen, who promotes depth development especially in the bullpen to counteract the every-day schedule.

There is pitching experience with Ries (3-6, 1-S, 3.66 ERA, 73-IP), Adam Weber (4-1, 3-S, 3.01, 54-IP), McCallum and Derek Moen, but even more inexperience at the Legion level with newbies Blake Searles, Sam Weber, Joe Colwell and 16-year-olds Seth Rosin, left-hander Brett Cleveringa and Brandon Porten.



Newbies. Front, L to R: Joe Colwell, Bjorn Anderson and Brandon Porten; Back: Brett Cleveringa, Blake Searles, Seth Rosin and Sam Weber.

Defensively the Red looks strikingly similar to a year ago. McCallum, one of the state's premier shortstops, again will be the anchor. Also back is second baseman Chase Traeger (.293, .440) and third baseman Matt Frakes (.371, .433). Larsen's "big target" trio at first includes Searles, Adam Weber (.308, .455) and Cleveringa. The team's utility infielder is newbie Bjorn Anderson.

Field and Moen return behind the plate. "Both of them are excellent. They call good games," said Larsen.

The fence guard has one thing common: "We're geared for speed in the outfield," said Larsen. His outfield includes Gazich, Eid, Justin Hemauer (.328, .417), Cory Sheets, Adam Weber and Colwell.

Again, plenty of depth. "That gives us a lot of options at the plate," said Larsen.

And if they run out of baseball options? They can simply cast an imposing shadow over their opponents. The size of the 2005 team is comparable to the cast of giants on the '99 squad. Five are at least 6 feet, two inches and several are just shy of that. "If we can't play baseball we're going to play football — we've got a line and a quarterback," joked Larsen.

And the batting order? It will be extremely fluid. "I'm going to tinker with it quite a bit in the first 15 games. We'll see how it goes," Larsen said.

Each batter will certainly get an opportunity with approximately 50 games this summer including an 11-day trip with stops in Dickinson, ND and Miles City, MT.

"It's not like we're on a cakewalk," said Larsen. This type of trip is not for every team.

"That's a long trip so you need a more seasoned team and I think this is a pretty good group for that. It's a good bonding trip — wood bat . . . it's true baseball," said Larsen, who would like to have wood bats as a requirement for the Fourth District. "I'd like to see that. It's the correct way to play the game."

Speaking of the district, Larsen likes the chances for Hamline and White Bear Lake. "Roseville had some trouble [in the high school season], but they'll get two or three guys from Cretin [for the Rosetown team] that can help them," he said. And the Red: "I think on paper we look pretty good."

Added Eid: "Growing up I always used to see Red in the paper — like '99, that year they went to the World Series and won it. I want to keep that tradition of Red baseball going."

Fans of all the Tri-City teams will get an early look as Post #513 hosts their first annual tournament, June 17-19 at Irondale High School. The tourney will showcase the Red and Blue (St. Anthony/Columbia Heights) Legion teams, along with the Gold and Maroon Senior Babe Ruth teams.



16-year-olds. L to R: Brett Cleveringa, Seth Rosin and Brandon Porten.

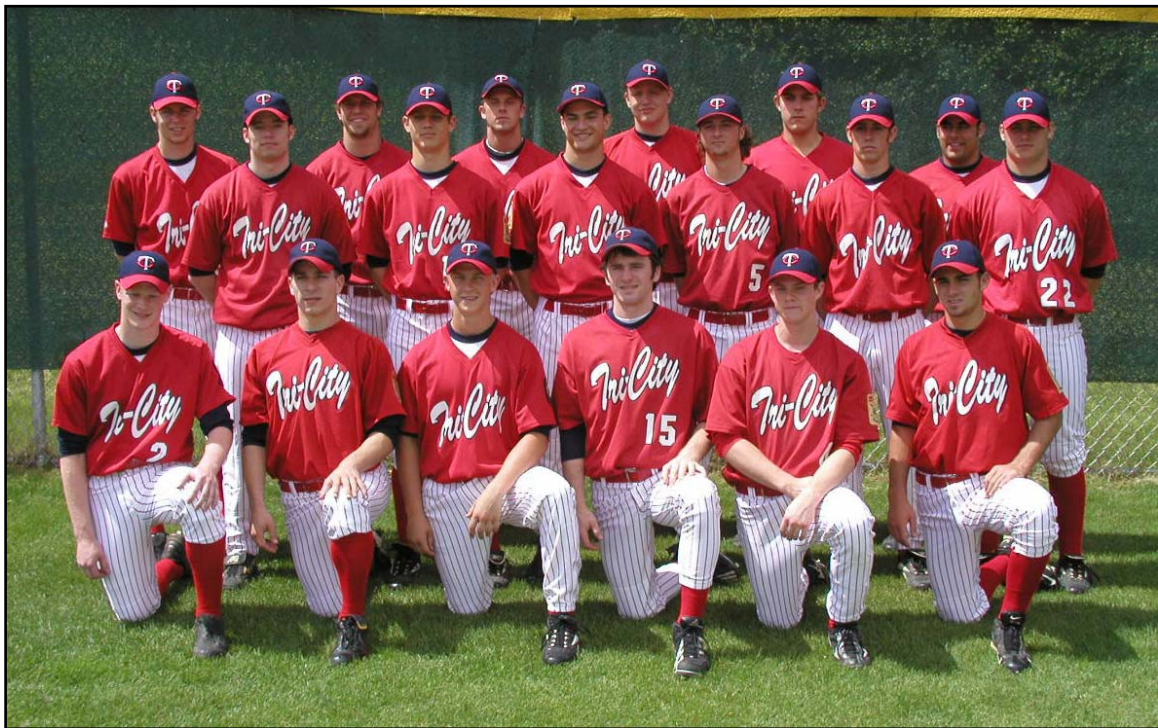
The round-robin set will include three contests: base running, throwing and a home run derby.

Along with the athletic exploits, the tourney is a great opportunity for the program to show the continued improvements to the Irondale diamond by Tri-City. Among them is a new batting cage and a variety of field upgrades, most notably the signage on the fences. There will also be a public address system in place and concessions will be offered.

“Little by little we’re getting there,” said Larsen. Future improvements include lights and a permanent concessions area. Larsen, who will be assisted by Doug Field and Glenn Poser, eventually would like to expand the tourney to include the Blue’s home field at St. Anthony.

“I think it’ll be great for the community,” Larsen said.

For the community — and the program — one that is loaded with a tradition of excellence.



Team. Front row, L to R: Brandon Porten, Justin Hemauer, Bjorn Anderson, Evan Eid, Joe Colwell and Chase Traeger.  
Middle row, L to R: Matt Frakes, Cory Sheets, Billy Gazich, Mark Ries, Derek McCallum, and Brady Field.  
Back row L to R: Derek Moen. Adam Weber. Blake Searles. Seth Rosin. Sam Weber. Brett Cleveringa.