

District Tournament Coverage – Championship Game

Eleven Heaven lifts Red to St. Cloud

By Greg Schmidt

August 1, 2005

Tri-City Red (37-8) earned their 10th state trip in 13 seasons in a grand, yet peculiar fashion July 30 with a 18-7 seven-inning thrashing of rival Hamline (23-11) in the Fourth District Championship at North St. Paul.

The Red wasted little time taking control with 11 runs in their first at bat. That set a team record for scoring by the Red in the first inning of district title games. Veteran outfielder Justin Hemauer (2 for 4, BB) couldn't recall a faster start in his career. "Eleven runs is a lot of runs . . . it's nice," said Hemauer. But it's not a guarantee as the team nearly set another record of equally epic proportions as Hamline mounted a steady and unsettling comeback over the next three innings scoring seven unanswered runs. The nearly 30-minute at bat for the Red in the first inning left their starter, Adam Weber, in a tough position.

"I was worried about Adam. That was a long stretch," said Red manager Jeff Larsen. "The first inning he had all his pitches working. After that it was kind of 'what is going to work.'"

He walked six in his final three innings. But as usual this summer, one player's struggle prompts another to step up. Enter Sam Weber. After a tough start against North St. Paul in the previous round, he was ready to prove himself. Not that he needed to with a team-leading 9-2 record.

But history stood in his way. The past three years the championship was pushed to a second deciding game.

Sam Weber started the fifth by walking the leadoff batter. He then struck out the next three to stop the Hamline rally cold and all of a sudden, there seemed no danger of an extra game. But could the Red pull away — take charge again and maybe even invoke the 10-run rule?

By the sixth inning, there were doubts. The Red had gone scoreless since the first. The players were growing impatient. "It was frustrating," said Hemauer. "We weren't even into the game . . . we finally figured that out in the bottom of the sixth that it's time to get going."

The Red wanted to celebrate — and so they did — by securing the state entry with a six-inning surge. Brady Field (3 for 5, 2-2B, 2-RBI) kicked it off with the first of his two doubles in the inning. After a couple of Hamline miscues made it 12-7, Derek McCallum (3 for 5, 2B, 4-RBI) launched a two-run double to the left field track. With two out, Adam Weber (2 for 4, SF, 3-RBI) and Bjorn Anderson (2 for 5, RBI) hit back-to-back

single base run-makers. But that only made it a nine-run lead. Another run was paramount.

No problem.

Once again Sam Weber (1 for 2, 2-RBI), who logged the most innings on the hill this summer, but was among the lowest actually swinging the bat with eight plate appearances, was in a situation. Either add clutch hitting to his arsenal or provide more innings on the mound. He chose the former by lacing the first pitch to centerfield for a two-run single. "I actually wasn't aware of that at the time, but when I looked up at the scoreboard I was pleased," he said. What he realized the 11-run lead, there was no interest in letting Hamline initiate another big rally. Weber followed up the key hit by retiring Hamline in order to finish off his third and final inning of shutout relief, not to mention clinching the Red's third consecutive Fourth District playoff title, fourth straight state appearance and eighth in the past nine seasons.

Speaking of 11 — that's how many Red batters collected at least one hit: Billy Gazich (2 for 3, 2-HBP, 2-RBI), Joe Colwell (2 for 4, BB, RBI), Blake Searles (1 for 3) and Chase Traeger (2 for 2, RBI), who was replaced by Matt Frakes (1 for 4) after aggravating an upper leg strain in the first inning. One observer joked he was surprised there weren't a bunch of pulled hamstrings as a result of going to the bat rack so frequently.

Tri-City's victory also completes a four-game season sweep of Hamline — the team's most impressive over their rival since 1997 when they won all five meetings including the district and state championship games.

The Red had a season high 21 hits, their fourth straight game with 17 or more. Following the team's two-week trip of wood bat tournaments, they were unable to reach double digits in the hit column for seven consecutive games. "It took us awhile, but they're back now ready to hit," Larsen said.

And ready for the next level. The roster includes 11 with state Legion experience. "We just have a better team this year, a lot more talent and the young kids are coming through," said Hemauer. He expects the Red to do a lot better. "We've got pretty high expectations. We've got the pitching, the depth."

Larsen added that the veteran guidance has been huge this summer.

"You want that experience to translate into leadership and that's what it has done," he said. "You see them all doing that. Whether they're on the bench or in the field. They're all pulling for each other."

Last year the Red was knocked around by the Woodbury Blue, the Third District champ, in the first round. This year the Red will meet another Third District power in Apple Valley at Faber Field on Thursday at 1 p.m. The 76ers finished second to the Blue in the playoffs and they've been ranked in the top-10 all season, just like the Red.

“I think they’re going there with the attitude not that we just got there . . . let’s go and try to do something there,” said Larsen.

Added Sam Weber: “Our goal was state [and more]. We’re gonna be gunning for it.”

Luckily the Red didn’t suffer the same fate that several other top-10 teams did in the district playoffs. Top-ranked West St. Paul and No. 2 Lakeville were both ambushed.

Both reside in the Third District. Also, Maple Grove, ranked seventh, and ninth-ranked Burnsville were eliminated. In all, 11 of the top-20 teams will not need a hotel reservation in St. Cloud.

The Red has won nine straight, two shy of their longest streak this summer. The squad is making its 10th state appearance in the last 13 seasons. They’ve won five state titles with the last coming in 2000. After missing the tourney in 2001, the Red has been back ever since, but lost in the first round each year. They last met Apple Valley on the grand stage in ’02. The Red fell in that losers’ bracket game and the 76ers went on to claim the state title. The last time they met in the first round was 1998 with the 76ers winning 16-13 against legendary Red hurler Steve Grasley.

**Fourth District Championship July 30 (Game 45)
Tri-City Red 18, Hamline 7**

Hamline	0	3	2	2	0	0	0	—	7	8	5
TCR	11	0	0	0	0	7	x	—	18	21	1

Berg, Jones (1), Borer (6) and Marzolf; A. Weber, S. Weber (5) and Field. W-A. Weber (7-0). L-Berg (6-3).