

Big Red Machine brings back a dozen on a mission

By Greg Schmidt

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It's been awhile — six years to be exact — since Tri-City Red of Post #513 was forced into such a scramble to prepare for the upcoming season. The reason: the Mounds View High School team advanced all the way to the section final. Eight of those players are part of this year's 16-member squad.

Despite the large chunk of time that had passed since the last Mounds View team made it that deep into the playoffs manager Jeff Larsen, who will be assisted again by Glenn Poser, had a contingency plan at the ready. "We'd have to do some doubleheaders — four or five of those," Larsen said.

But after Mounds View was swept in the championship series, the schedule returned to normal —more or less.

"Once I got over that shock and certainly a disappointment for the kids, then I let them have a day off and then had a practice on Friday," said Larsen, now in his record ninth season at the helm. The Red squeezed in one more practice the day before their opener against rival Hamline June 12.

"It seemed like we had lot less time to prepare," Larsen said. In the team's favor is the return of a dozen players. That ties a club record set in 2002.

Four times the fun

"On paper they look like a pretty decent team. They've been there and have high hopes and they're all pretty seasoned players, but they still got to go out and play," Larsen said. Leading the veteran charge are Billy Gazich and Brady Field. They are not the first Red players to benefit under the rule change in 2003 that allows players that turn 19 after January 1 to compete the following summer, but they are the first two in Red uniforms to earn a fourth season because of it.

"Being a fourth-year player you know what's going on and what to expect. When you think about it, it's special," Field said.

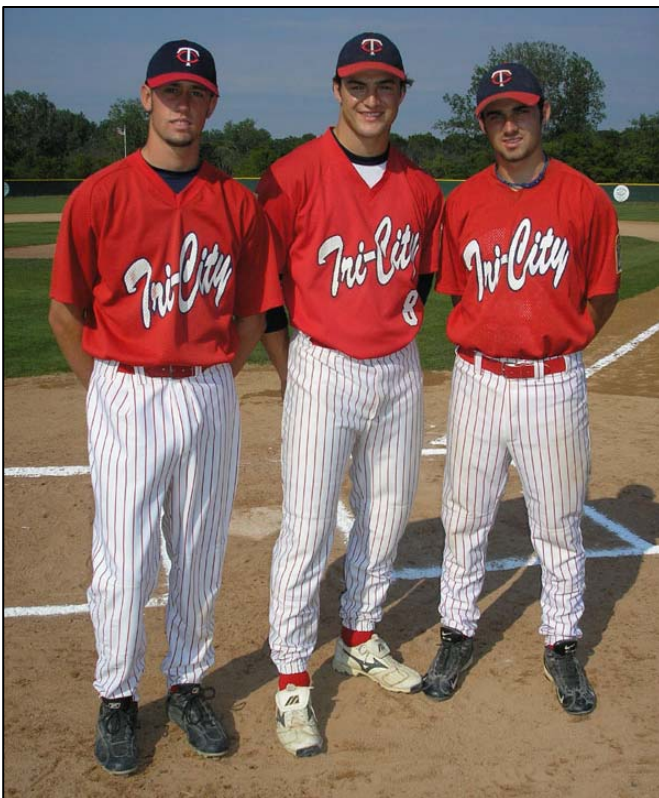
A first for Tri-City (L-R): fourth-year players Billy Gazich and Brady Field.



Said Larsen: “It’s really good for the team and they’re both really good kids and quality players. Both are key guys that will bring the level up for the rest of them.”

Field graduated from Hill-Murray while Gazich finished up his freshman year at North Dakota State University and had the option of playing for an amateur team. “My hat is off to him for coming back,” Larsen said.

For Gazich, the decision to return was easy: “It was an automatic. Red has always been great — starting with the coaching all the way to the guys back at the Legion. It’s been great,” he said. Also contributing to his decision, “The potential of the group, talent-wise, team-wise and character-wise . . . we have great guys on the team,” Gazich said. He is the first repeat captain in team history. Fellow captains are Derek McCallum and Chase Traeger.



2006 tri-captains (L-R): Derek McCallum, Billy Gazich and Chase Traeger.

Pick 1493

McCallum, not only is headed to the University of Minnesota on a baseball scholarship this fall, he also has the distinction of being the only player in the dugout to have his rights held by a Major League team — the Minnesota Twins.

Said McCallum: “I was down at college orientation on the day of the draft and I got a call from [Twins scout] Mark Wilson. He talked to my family and said he would be following me over the summer and talk to me [in the fall].”

Although McCallum knew of the possibility of being selected, the reality of it was plenty exciting.

“My family and I had spoken with them and we talked about it, but it was still a surprise because you never know . . . I was pick number 1493,” McCallum said. More specifically he said, “a draft and follow type” where the Twins will watch him over the summer and possibly tender an offer before school starts. If an offer doesn’t materialize (Sept. 6), McCallum will reenter the draft after his junior year. “We sure are proud of him and we can always say he came through the Red program,” Larsen said.

Dandy dozen

Four-year guys, a pro draftee, and of course the numbers don't lie. That 2002 club that had 12 veterans finished 38-13 along with a trip to the state tourney.

The Red returned 11 a year ago and closed out the season at 37-10 also with a visit to state.

Are 35 or more wins in store for this season?

"It doesn't necessarily guarantee victories, it guarantees a good team, but the team has to come to play every day," said Gazich. Added McCallum: "I think everyone is pretty excited about the chemistry this year and obviously we have a lot of pitchers which is always good . . . almost half the team can pitch and are very good at it. That makes it a lot easier coming in."

Larsen can't help but be carefully optimistic with a roster full of experience. "I'd say with 12 coming back, they're prepared — they've been through the Red wars and how we play ball," he said. "It's a good ingredient to have and we'll see how it goes. We'll always see teams at a different level and they're best pitcher."

Adam back in the fold

Their opponents will have to face some great pitching as well. And the bullpen got that much deeper with Larsen's announcement just prior to the season opener that Adam Weber (49.2-IP, 38-H, 25-BB, 48-SO, 2.54 ERA) will be returning. Weber, who earned a football scholarship to the U of M, is excited for one more round.

At first glance, he wasn't going to play any baseball due to the preparation for the gridiron this fall. Then came an offer to play sparingly for an amateur team. Later, he heard about an open spot on the Red's roster and, "I couldn't turn down that opportunity to play with my friends one more time and to play Tri-City Red ball because it's a lot of fun," he said. "I just wanted to make sure everybody knew I couldn't be there all the time. I just want to hopefully keep [our opponents] from scoring runs and help this team win."

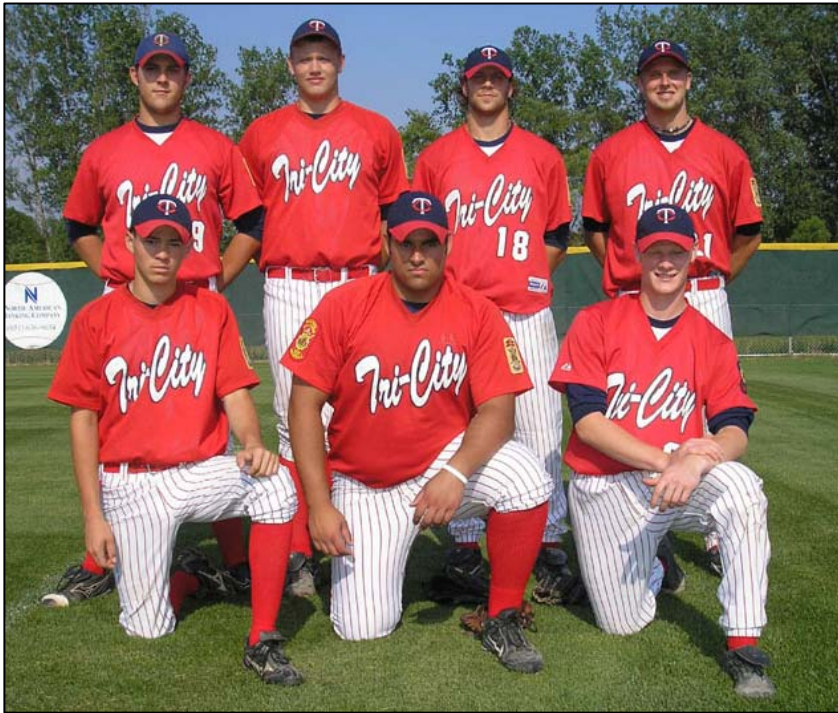
He did just that in his first outing June 14 with a complete game shutout of rival North St. Paul.

Joining him are fellow starters Sam Weber (67-IP, 52-H, 38-BB, 63-SO, 3.45), Seth Rosin (54.1-IP, 38-H, 19-BB, 56-SO, 2.83) and left-hander Brett Cleveringa (21-IP, 14-H, 12-BB, 10-SO, 1.33).

Blake Searles (41.2-IP, 30-H, 29-BB, 23-SO, 1.85) will see plenty of relief duty and may also start. Brandon Porten (20-IP, 18-H, 5-BB, 5-SO, 2.45) and newbie Erik Fiegel will also log time in relief.

In total, the Red returns six of their seven pitchers from last season.

“The starting side is fine, but we have to develop the relief side more,” Larsen said. “It sure helps with Adam. It really helps us to be able to look at other kids and develop them at a good pace and of course his speed in the outfield and he can play first.”



An armful again — the 2006 hurlers (front row L-R), Erik Fiegel, Brett Cleveringa and Brandon Porten. (Back row, L-R) Sam Weber, Seth Rosin, Adam Weber and Blake Searles.

The addition of Weber has also made a difference for state poll voters, who upon notice of his return, immediately bumped up their votes for the Red, ranked fifth in the preseason poll.

Knock on wood

Pollsters, among others, will also be watching the change in weaponry by the Fourth District.

The sound of a batted ball will resonate much sweeter this summer as the entire district will use wood bats. The move, spearheaded by Larsen three years ago, finally was approved at a meeting last fall. “I didn’t get a lot of support [at first], but [Hamline coach Mike Brown] joined in and we got the other [coaches] to get excited about it,” Larsen said. “It was a nearly unanimous vote.” Tri-City stepped up to get the motion passed by providing extra bats to the other teams that couldn’t raise the necessary funds. “It took that concern off the table,” Larsen said. He added that the change should provide a much better learning tool for the players.

“I just like coaching that way . . . the kids learn more about the game — plays you can do and how you pitch,” he said.

In just a couple games, the players have noticed several differences. “We’ve already seen a little change in the pace of the game,” Gazich said. “They’re a lot quicker — quite a bit

more small ball.” Added McCallum: “It does make it a little harder because the sweet spot is much smaller, but personally I love it.”

Catcher Brady Field believes it gives a big advantage to pitchers.

“Pitchers it helps a ton. You can bust somebody inside and have the potential to break their bat. With aluminum, they’re afraid to pitch inside because [players] can hit it 400 feet,” Field said.

The Red’s near perfect performance (13-1) using wood bats for a two week stretch last summer proved they can win with the wood bats, but the switch back wasn’t so easy. “I think some of us really struggled when we went back to aluminum. We’ll have to make the adjustments,” Field said.

The district has left open the possibility to switch back to aluminum for the playoffs.

“People want a chance to review it if need be,” Larsen said. “I think in time we’ll see all the districts in the state using [wood bat].”

No room for error

Wood or metal, it won’t make much difference defensively for the Red. The squad returns an excellent group — lauded as one of the best in the state.

It all starts with McCallum, the team’s third-year shortstop.

“He’s the best,” Larsen said, noting the striking resemblance to another Red great, Rick Brosseau, who like McCallum, not only had a great left-handed bat, but also was a premier shortstop for Hill-Murray and eventually the U of M. “Derek has just unbelievable range making the impossible look pretty normal,” said Larsen.

McCallum will see a couple of familiar faces to his left and right with second baseman Chase Traeger and third baseman Bjorn Anderson.

The first base platoon includes Searles, Adam Weber, Cleveringa and Seth Rosin. “They’ll all see time over there,” Larsen said.

Field, one of the best catchers in the state, returns behind the plate. His backup will be Erik Anderson, who will also see time in the outfield and designated hitter slot.

Adam Weber leads the fence guard in centerfield along with Joe Colwell in right and Gazich in left.

Now batting

Although plate juggernaut Justin Hemauer (.415, 3-HR, 33-RBI, 66-H, 48-R) eclipsed the age limit and moved on to the Tri-City Shark amateur team, the Red should still be intimidating — returning a talented group of hitters led by Field and McCallum.

Gazich (.311, 27-RBI, 33-H, 27-R) will lead it off followed by Traeger (.325, 3-HR, 26-RBI, 49-H, 53-R), McCallum (.361, 3-HR, 43-RBI, 53-H, 51-R) and Field (.277, 3-HR, 36-RBI, 35-H, 25-R). After the fearsome four-some it'll be Adam Weber (.333, 3-HR, 35-RBI, 37-H, 31-R) and Searles (.363, 10-RBI, 20-H, 11-R). Colwell (.372, 6-RBI, 29-H, 17-R), the Anderson brothers, Bjorn (.356, 16-RBI, 31-H, 21-R) and Erik, and Porten will find time in the last three slots. "And I have to give some of these pitchers [Cleveringa, Sam Weber and Seth Rosin] some at bats," Larsen said. "They're big kids that can hit the ball. I really want to give them their chances and it makes us more versatile."

Challengers?

It's that versatility that remains unmatched on paper by fellow district teams in their collective mission to stop the Red from returning to state for the ninth time in the last 10 seasons.

"I'm sure that's how everybody is looking at it. I really think Arcade-Phalen will be good this year and Hamline and North St. Paul," Larsen said. Arcade-Phalen is a doormat no more. "I think they're going to surprise a lot of people."

Unfortunately for those same upstarts, the Red also has something to prove.

Last summer the Red was guaranteed two games at state and was gone in two games, a first for the program in 10 state appearances in their 16 years of existence.

"Last year was just embarrassing getting 10-runned [Apple Valley] and then losing again [in the losers' bracket to Duluth]," Field said. Added Gazich, "We do have something to prove and with the pitching depth we have — we have to go deeper into the state tournament and hopefully beyond."

For McCallum, the annual proving ground is just part of being a Red player.

"I think we have something to prove every year just because we are Tri-City Red and everyone expects a lot out of us, so yeah I would expect nothing less than the state tournament [berth] again this year, hopefully," he said. "Then we better prove that we belong there."

However, all three are well aware there is plenty to get done to even get another chance. Said Larsen: "They know how hard it is to get there. The first thing is to win the league title and get out of the knock out round."

Diamond dancing

What Larsen is referring to is the fact that the regular season champion gets a bye in the first round single elimination and advances to the double elimination second round.

Getting that top seed is indeed difficult. Some districts have only a dozen league games. The Fourth has each team meet three times for a total of 18 — and outside of the district meat grinder it'll be no picnic.

The Red's schedule was made even more difficult this year with the addition of the Worth CWS tournament in Omaha — and the Gopher Classic. Both are nationally recognized tournaments. The Red has been in the Gopher Classic several times. “The Gopher is always really tough. I think half of the teams are from outside the state.” Larsen said.

Omaha, as the tourney name suggests, not only will have the Legion tournament, but also be playing host to the College World Series. “That's a tough one with the [CWS]. That, in itself will draw the quality teams from all over the country,” Larsen said. And Nebraska isn't too shabby either when it comes to Legion talent. The state, along with Minnesota and Pennsylvania are among the top three in the country for Legion participation.

The Omaha gig will pose yet another challenge because of simple math. The Red will be without four players: McCallum, Field, Sam Weber and Adam Weber.

But Larsen remains positive: “I always know we're going to lose a few to the [Lions' All-Star Series] and other things, but we don't lose them all so we can go . . . It's a good opportunity for other kids to step up and for me to build some versatility. I feel fine with it.”

On the other hand, for the first time in over a decade, the Red will be able to take a full arsenal to the Fargo/Moorhead tourney.

“And there's some really good rivalries like with Moorhead and Eau Claire,” Larsen said. “It's a nice way to play — with a full roster except for the two double-rostered guys Brian Marshik and Jake Lechner, who will be with the [Senior Babe Ruth] Tri-City Gold.”

No matter what happens, the atmosphere will be fun — certainly at the home tilts where Bob Sheets, returns as announcer. “We got the voice of Tri-City back for another one,” Larsen said.

Let the games begin.