

Red storm tackles winds of change

Outlook great for '08

By Greg Schmidt

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It was a banner season for Tri-City Red last summer as the squad made their deepest run at the state tournament in five years by finishing sixth. And this year, a solid reloading process had them poised to go even further, perhaps up to the levels of their last state championship in 2000. All appeared well again for the Big Red Machine at the end of the 2007 season. Just over a month later, however, Red players both past and present along with the many fans, friends and family were dealt a heavy blow with the sudden, but peaceful passing of Post 513 baseball founder, Elmer Buttweiler.

Buttweiler's memory was honored at the team's annual dinner last week. Red manager Jeff Larsen recalls the last conversation he had with him in August. "He was really looking forward to this season after last summer. He wanted to get working on things."

Buttweiler, who would have turned 80 this year and had already battled heart issues for several years, began feeling seriously ill the first week of September. Tests confirmed an aggressive cancer. "And a week later that was it," Larsen said. "I was . . . we all were pretty sad, definitely really a sad time." While the healing process continued throughout the winter for everyone in the Tri-City community, Larsen said the true reality took hold this spring. "Elmer was a big part of the program. He really liked the tryouts," Larsen said. "He'd sit there and look at the sheet and make evaluations . . . He had pretty good insight into what was going on with the kids. He didn't just go to the games. He read all the write-ups and the box scores. We just didn't have that this spring."

And this summer, the reflections of Tri-City fans and players will continue to be stoked without Buttweiler in attendance. "Now there's an empty space up there [in the bleachers]. We all will miss him," Larsen said.

A tough off season

Some suggested that Buttweiler may have been truly at peace simply because the flagship teams he pioneered into existence (first the Blue in 1985 and the Red five years later) were running on all cylinders with a steady and promising future ahead of them.

However, nobody could have predicted, including Elmer, what would happen as the winter took hold, to disrupt such a proud and successful program. With his passing along with the retirement of long-time Fourth District Director George Bodlovick, state officials swooped in and implemented a massive change to the set of long-time rules utilized to build teams.

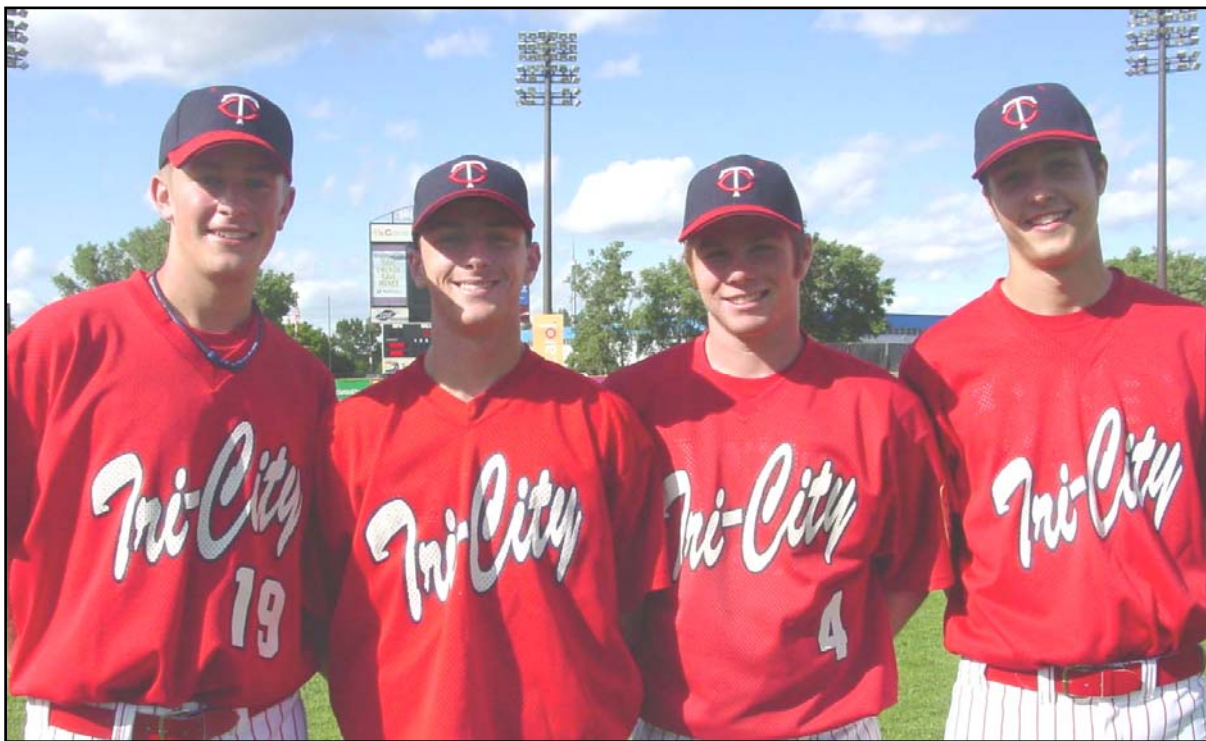
For the foreseeable future, the Fourth District will now form teams not based on a school district, but rather a base school. It appeared simple enough, but the endless amount of paperwork has proved otherwise, as coaches were left reading and re-reading the complex set of rules for player selections. Along with that, some players in the district were forced with no place to play. Said Larsen: "[Elmer] in this case — he's probably glad he's not here. Elmer had a lot of common sense and this doesn't make any sense."

In the end, the district teams accepted the change and moved on. It didn't have a major impact on the Red as present players are "grandfathered" in; however it did negatively affect a player or two and that number may increase next year and that would have been enough to bother Buttweiler, who said several times, 'It's about the kids.'

Great in '08?

For this summer, the Red appears to have great potential with a solid core of returning stars and plenty of talented newbies. Or do they? Larsen put it another way: "We lost seven pitchers and a catcher, and the infield has to be replaced . . . other than that we're fine."

So indeed there is work to be done and leadership will become paramount. Veterans (L to R below), Dan Reichert, Tommy Thompson, Nick Colwell, and Jack Ries should point the way as the team's captains.



Said Colwell: "It was my first year in Legion ball last year and I didn't really know what to expect and a lot of older guys on the team really stepped it up a lot last year for us."

He wants more than just improvement for this team. "This year we just have to be hungry to get back to that point [the state tourney] and then try to take it to the next level," he said.

Reichert, who missed most of the high school season because of an illness, can't wait to get going. "It gets me working a lot of harder [after missing a lot in the spring]," he said. He likes the Red's chances. "What does coach [Larsen] say, "We don't rebuild, we reload . . . ' That's how it's always been."

It's all about the depth

The biggest reloading challenge is pitching and although a wealth of veteran hurlers are gone, including Seth Rosin, now studying and playing baseball at the U of M, Larsen is confident in the stable of arms he has for this summer. He lists Colwell, Aaron Page, David Freed, and Reichert from the left side – and on the right: Paul Myers, Andy Gallagher, Thompson and Ries. Two other right-handers rounding out the top ten are Phil Wessberg and Jesse Nickols. “I think we have enough veterans. These guys have been there before, but . . . for the new guys . . . it's Legion — it's a step up,” Larsen said.

Behind the plate is veteran Matt Tetrick – and Wessberg along with Thompson. Larsen even included the multi-talented Colwell as a candidate. “He could do it if we needed him. He could play anywhere,” joked Larsen, adding “although he might struggle at [some of the infield positions] being a lefty.”

Colwell, the consummate team player will do whatever is asked to help the team succeed. “I used to play all [the positions] . . . if need be I could,” Colwell said.

At first base Larsen has Reichert, Brandon Hershey, and Jesse Nickols on the top of the depth chart, while at second he lists Luke Ross, Ross LaDuke and Ethan Imdieke, along with Ries, who could also spend time at shortstop and third. Also at short: LaDuke, Nickols. Ian Goldsmith and Imdieke — and at third base: Brad Blumer, Ross, and Nickols.

Colwell and Thompson will anchor the outfield and be joined by Freed, Goldsmith, Reichert, Ross, Nickols and Myers.

The strength, as with past Larsen teams, is undoubtedly the defensive depth. “Yeah, I'm big on that and where we have to work hard at is the pitching, but that goes with the defense,” Larsen said. “The outfield is strong and fast. The infield is still a work in progress. It will take awhile.”

But hopefully not too long. “During practice making mistakes now is maybe okay, but as soon as the season starts, you've got to come to play,” Colwell said.

Power at the plate?

What shouldn't take too long is the Red's ability to wear out the bases. The team should again chalk up plenty of runs.

Larsen will likely tinker with his lineup for the first couple of weeks, while he explores different combinations, in comparison to the defensive alignment. One area that might need a closer examination is the glaring hole in the leadoff spot, occupied last year by stand-out Brian Marshik. “He was just a phenomenal leadoff hitter for us,” Larsen said. “That's a key spot . . . I just think it's going to take a few games for us to figure it out.”

He does expect Colwell, Thompson, Freed and Goldsmith to secure the heart of the order. The team's designated hitter could be Andy Kurkowski, who was one of the top hitters in the state in the spring of '07 before a shoulder injury limited his production. Kurkowski was the designated hitter this spring as he progresses back to where he was a year ago. “From the left side for DH you could have a number of them including Hershey,” Larsen said.

Despite the continuing use of wood bats in league games, Larsen expects the long ball to make a solid return to the Red's batting order after falling off a bit last year. Colwell agrees: "I think you might see more home runs. We've got a couple guys' swings that were made for hitting home runs . . . Last year we had a lot more average hitters — more small ball last year, but this year it could be bigger power numbers for us."

More changes

Unlike the last couple of years, wood bats will be abandoned for the district playoffs. The playoff format itself will also have a different look than in recent years.

Actually it'll be a return to the year 2000 and the '90's as the district expands this year with the addition of a second Hamline squad. Hamline Purple is based out of Cretin-Derham Hall – and Hamline Red, out of Highland Park. That makes for an even number of teams (eight) and no need for a first round playoff bye that goes to the regular season league champ.

Now it will be double elimination from the first pitch. Also gone is the "easy" route for the top seed. Instead of only needing to win three games, the district playoff champion will have won five playoff games before the state tournament. "It's a five day grind," Larsen said.

Added Colwell, "It's going to be a lot more on pitching this year. You can't just do it with two guys in the playoffs. So we're going to have to find some guys to step up into that starting pitching role because that's going to be the biggest difference."

Reichert believes the new format will again play into the Red's favor. "We have at least two or three people who can play every position. We have a solid pitching staff and we can hit the ball a long ways with our lineup. It will go to our benefit again," he said.

Larsen said the return to the old playoff format does alter the regular season strategy a bit. "Now when you win the district it doesn't have the same significance because you end up playing everybody in the playoffs," Larsen said.

He continued: "We're going to try to win every one of them [in the regular season], but we want to be the last team standing (in the playoffs)."

Added Reichert: "Obviously our goal coming in is to get to state and after we get there, do well at state. I'd like to see us do well at the Gopher Classic too considering we didn't play well at all that weekend last year. That would be a huge momentum builder to do well in that tournament."

Again the team to beat

The Red is the preseason Fourth District favorite after their strong finish last summer. "We just have to find the right combinations. Other than that it should be a good year for Tri-City, and if Elmer can help us from up there I'll take it," Larsen said.

Despite the top-dog label, Larsen expects it to be a difficult battle with Hamline Purple and North St. Paul. "The Purple will be solid, and North St. Paul will be quite a bit stronger [they added Hill-Murray to their attendance area]," he said. His darkhorse list includes Arcade-Phalen and Hamline Red, while Rosetown, White Bear and North End "have great potential."

Added Colwell: “You can’t take any league games off because every team is solid in our league again . . . Hamline [purple] that’s the Cretin team and that’s going to be a good ball club.”

Statewide, Eden Prairie has won four consecutive state Legion titles, and Coon Rapids will return a few in addition to a group that won the state AAA high school championship a week ago. Larsen also likes traditional power Apple Valley, along with Rosemount and the Red’s sister team, Tri-City Blue, that is fed mainly from St. Anthony, this year’s AA state high school champ.

Larsen will be assisted by former Red standouts Rus Poser (’97-’99), Andy Wehr (’00) and David Norgard (’07). Not returning because of schedule conflicts is announcer Bob Sheets. “That’s a big loss. I’m going to miss the voice of Tri-City,” Larsen said.

