

For Connecticut champs, 'it's more than baseball'

WEST HARTFORD — The members of the 2023 American Legion Post 96 baseball team were staring at one another, the losses to Franklin, Mass., and Nashua, N.H., in the 2023 Tournament stinging. There was to be no shrugging it off as a disappointing end to a fun summer, no going separate ways.

"It's more than baseball with this team," said Declan McCann. "We're playing for each other, people before us, people who served our country, and playing for our town, representing where we came from, all from West Hartford. It was a sad feeling, we came up short, and we wanted to come back and redo it because we still have that feeling in our stomach."

One by one, McCann, Matt Santoro, Brendan Grady, Trevor Tanis and Tristan Baron, players who could have, and normally might've moved on, spoke up in the gloom under a tent that August evening in Shrewsbury, Mass., and announced they were coming back to try again.

"Tears all around, those guys said, 'we will be back,'" said coach Sean McCann, Declan's father. "They made that decision and I said, 'take some time,' I know a lot can happen in a young man's life in a year, but they were on me in the early spring to show their commitment."

In West Hartford, the town's Legion team matters, its hi-level. Some ballplayers choose the AAU, travel-ball route, that has its place. But the concept of Legion ball in places like this, where kids grow up playing together at the youth level, often become high school rivals at Conard and Hall, then reunite for the summer, still has appeal and develops players in a way no other does.

"I've played with these guys my whole life," Declan McCann said. "So we were just like, 'one more year, why not?' It was a fun year last year, we've played high school together, youth league, Little League, one more year together, why not? Enjoy it."

Post 96 repeated as 2024 under-19 state champs last Friday at Palmer Field in Middletown with a 4-2 victory over Danbury as Brendan Grady, who has finished his freshman season at Trinity, stole home in the sixth inning to break a tie. Calvin Cianflone, who'd missed a bunt attempt, singled to drive in an insurance run and Owen Ludgin got the final four outs on the mound.

"Everyone on this team would do anything for each other, whereas somewhere else guys might show up for a game and you don't even know their names," Grady said

West Hartford plays small ball, with an aggressive approach typified by that play, when a teammate didn't get a piece of the ball on a suicide squeeze attempt and Grady kept coming.

"It's hard for the other team," Grady said. "There's really no way to defend it. If we do it right, we're really hard to stop."

This summer, West Hartford (23-4) won the Zone 1 championship, then after losing the opener of the state tournament, won for consecutive elimination games, beating Middletown during the day Friday and Danbury in the winner-take-all final.

"The state tournament was a lot of fun, we grinded really hard and all of us grew together as teammates," said Chase Hanawalt, who played at Hall High. "A lot of these kids went off to college,

but they all wanted to experience what happened last year and Coach McCann was very adamant in bring us altogether as brother so we could experience this feeling again. A lot of us will be aging out of it next year and wanted to experience it one more time.”

After some batting practice at Conard High on Tuesday, the team got a sendoff from the members of Post 96 and boarded their bus to Manchester, N.H., where they will open the Northeast Regional against the Rhode Island champs from Cumberland at 12:30 p.m. Wednesday. Hanawalt is expected to start the opener of the double elimination tournament, in which West Hartford went two-and-out a year ago.

“We’re all older, we all got better,” Grady said. “We’ve got a little more experience this year and I think we’ve got a different mentality this year, we have a lot to prove and we know what we can do.”

If they can win in New Hampshire, the kids from West Hartford would move on to the 97th American Legion World Series in Shelby, N.C. Aug. 15-20.

“It’s very special to go out and show off what we have to bring pride to the town and the veterans who are part of the Post 96 program,” Hanawalt said. “A lot of us have grown since last year, become better ballplayers, and it seems like we all want it more than last year.”

American Legion ball has a long tradition in Connecticut — this is West Hartford’s eighth championship dating back to 1941 — but in recent decades more players have opted for travel ball, especially younger players since Legion began playing 19-year-olds. At UConn, coach Jim Penders and all of his assistants played American Legion ball as teenagers, but only a handful of the current Huskies have.

“We’d love to see American Legion ball make a comeback,” Penders said, “so we can recruit more of those players. It’s merit-based baseball. When a kid comes up with the bases loaded, it’s an earned opportunity. There’s a huge appeal, because kids are playing for something bigger than themselves. Winning championships is the best developer of talent there is.”

All 14 players on the roster are West Hartford residents, 13 played at Hall or Conard with one, Myles Fournier, attending CREC Academy of Aerospace and Engineering in Bloomfield. For Post 96, the cost for play is about \$400 per player, with resources available to help. Sean McCann played for the Post from 1988 to 91, and has been coaching with the program since 2010, taking over the U-19 squad four years ago.

“Part of my coaching philosophy is to give them what I felt,” Sean McCann said. “And I had those guys I grew up with, those guys I battled against in Conard-Hall, and there’s a whole other player to that. There’s a form accountability. If you’re stepping out of line, the ‘dogs’ come and get you. I don’t know if that can exist on a team with 14 guys from different spots.”

Jack Kane, who is heading to play with Saint Joseph’s Division III program next year, played travel ball much of his career before switching to the Legion team.

“I played AAU, it’s good competition too,” Kane said, “but you get to a point where it becomes playing for yourself and not everybody focused on winning games. To come here, look to win games, do it with your friends, it’s been a better time.”

Some of the 14 are headed to college ball, including Grady, Tristan Baron, who plays at Catholic University, Hanawalt, committed to play at Fordham. For some, this week's games will be the last baseball they play, at least the last baseball that means as much as this.

"It's our last year playing and most of us know that," Declan McCann said. "Some of us are playing college baseball, some of us aren't, so we really have nothing to lose. So that feeling we have, we're going to go out and give it all we've got."