

# CRAIG AYERS – 2001 GRADUATE – EATON REDS

## *THIS IS EATON BASEBALL*

The Reds, like all top programs, carry a bit of a swagger, having the expectation of winning every game, knowing that anything short of victory in the final game of the season memorializes the entire season as unsuccessful. Arguably few things are as brazen as believing in yourself even when others appear to not foresee your success. The greatest example of this in Eaton Baseball history is 2001 graduate Craig Ayers.

Abraham Lincoln is renowned for his persistence, first losing to secure nearly every job he ever sought, before battling to come back to take over that position the next time, using an exceptional willpower to succeed that is hardly ever seen in even the most competitive of situations. Sure, today that kind of willpower is displayed by Tim Tebow, but very, very few others. Lincoln's will to win led him not only to the White House, but also into history and onto Mount Rushmore after making the hardest decision any President has ever undertaken—to declare war upon fellow Americans. He knew he was right, and history proved him to be so, regardless of the litany of naysayers at the time.

If the Reds Baseball program had a Mount Rushmore of its players, when evaluating candidates, the 10 out of 10 mark for persistence would be set by Craig Ayers. Craig wasn't selected to the all-star Pee Wee team when he was 11 years old, though many of his classmates were. He was not deterred though, and came back as a 12 year-old and made the all-star team, though as a low-round draft pick between the two Eaton all-star teams. Many players with more talent were chosen ahead of Craig.

Then as a 13 year-old, when the two all-star teams were combined into just one, Craig was cut at tryouts, not even making the squad. While that would be the end of the line for most ballplayers, Craig again was not deterred. Disappointed...certainly...but not willing to change course.

Craig spent the summer working on his pitching with his older brother Ken, a '91 Reds graduate and ace pitcher. Craig didn't face any live batters that summer, but he pitched to his brother as if live batters were standing in against him, and he had to throw strikes. He then started working on the patented Eaton knuckle-curveball. It was at first a floater, a hanger, a spinner, a piece of meat frankly, but he continued to work to improve the pitch.

He then entered high school, but in the spring of 1998 as the Reds posted their first undefeated season in history, Craig wasn't on the varsity roster, heck, he wasn't even on the JV roster, pitching only for the freshmen team, still trying to work on his knuckle curve. In 1999, as the Reds rattled off their 45<sup>th</sup> straight victory, Craig again wasn't in the dugout. That didn't stop what he was doing though, as the hard work was starting to pay off, and Craig now was showing signs of getting the knuckle curveball down as an effective pitch. Dominant...not even close, but something that could be used to get JV opponents to tap out...yes.

The Reds entered the 2000 season with a number of new faces, after graduating their greatest senior class in history in 1999. One of these new faces was Craig Ayers; he had finally made it to the varsity ballclub. A significant goal had been reached, but now Craig dreamt of reaching much higher. After having had a strong summer 1999 season, Craig appeared to be in a position to help the Reds on the mound in spring 2000. As it turned out, Craig went on to lead the team in innings pitched (51.2), strikeouts (90), wins (9), runs allowed (9), earned runs allowed (5), ERA (0.68), and complete games (4). Craig threw a gem in the State Semifinals, allowing just 3 hits, all singles, in a shutout victory in which only two batters even reached second base. This propelled the Reds to the State Championship Game the following day, but the Reds would go on to lose that game 7-6 to La Junta. Ayers had completed one of the best seasons on the mound in the history of Eaton Baseball in 2000, becoming one of a handful of pitchers to post an ERA under 1.00,

to go undefeated with 9 or more wins, and to pitch the Reds into the State Championship Game. But that wasn't good enough, Craig wanted the ball in the big game, and worked to get better in the summer of 2000 to ensure Coach Danley would save him back for the State Championship Game in 2001.

That's exactly what happened, as Ayers' persistence and hard work again was rewarded, as the Reds took a chance and saved back Ayers for an expected rematch against La Junta in the State Championship Game. Ayers entered the State Championship Game with 100 strikeouts in 55.1 innings, against only 20 walks and an ERA of 0.76. The match-up between ace pitchers garnered top headlines in the Denver newspapers. Ayers stated matter-of-factly: "It'll be great. For the last year, I've been thinking that I might end up pitching in the State Championship game. We got here. Here we go."

While the Reds got down 2-0 early on, Craig didn't waiver a bit in his determination to win this game, and once the Reds tied up the game 2-2 in the top of the 7<sup>th</sup> inning, Craig went out and shut down La Junta on just 5 pitches to send the game into extra innings. In the 8<sup>th</sup> inning, the Reds were put at risk after a passed ball on a strikeout and then a wild pitch put La Junta one hit away from defeating the Reds. Ayers then induced a groundout and with the game-winning run on 3<sup>rd</sup> base, struck out the next batter and then induced a groundout to end the threat. In the 9<sup>th</sup> inning, Ayers struck out the side in order, and then stranded a runner at third base in the 10<sup>th</sup> inning. After a leadoff single in the 11<sup>th</sup> inning, Ayers struck out the final two batters to end the inning. La Junta's ace pitcher, who had thrown 192 pitches, did not come out for the 12<sup>th</sup> inning, but Ayers would have none of it, telling Coach Danley he was fine. Ayers was once again correct, as he got two quick outs, and then after a single, struck out his 15<sup>th</sup> opponent on the day to end the 12<sup>th</sup> inning.

The Reds went on to win this game 4.5 hours after it started in the 15<sup>th</sup> inning, and it is remembered as "The Game", as frankly the Reds, and the State of Colorado, had never seen anything like it in a championship game. The Reds produced very little offense, striking out 26 times on the day, 24 times to La Junta's ace in the first 11 innings. The Reds even trailed 1-0 after the first inning and 2-0 after 4 innings to a pitcher that allowed fewer than 1 run per game on average, but the Reds knew that that was it, and Ayers wouldn't allow any runs late, so they fought to chip away and tie up the game. Despite being the visiting team in extra innings, and being without the comfort of last at-bats, the Reds were as confident in Ayers' ability to shut out La Junta each inning as Ayers was himself. He'd envisioned this moment back as a 13 year-old pitching to his brother and working just to make the team. He prepared for this moment over those next few years, and had the inner confidence, and will to win, to allow him to be completely under control and look calm in arguably the highest-pressure State Championship Game in Colorado history. Ayers' persistence paid off with a State Championship Trophy, State Tournament MVP Award, and legendary status among the ranks of the nation's winningest baseball program over the past quarter century. All of that from a kid that wasn't good enough to make an all-star team just a few years earlier. Lincoln would be proud. Eaton certainly is proud.





### Other Tebow-esque moments in the 2001 season:

--Aaron Kelly took the mound in the State Semifinals and faced only three batters over the minimum in a 5-0 shutout victory that allowed Ayers to be fresh and eligible for 12 full innings the following day.

--Scott Souther took the mound in the 14<sup>th</sup> inning with the potential game-ending run on base and no outs, and managed to get the Reds out of the jam by speeding up his motion just enough to prevent balking but to throw out a runner that was trying to steal home for what would have won the game for La Junta.

--Catcher Justin Ginther, immediately popped up on the attempted steal to catch the ball, drop to his knees and block home plate, and tag out the runner in a collision designed to knock the ball out, but Ginther held on to end the 14<sup>th</sup> inning; on a day in which the Reds struck out 26 times and seldom reached base, Ginther reached in 5 of his first 6 appearances showing zero fear of this future top MLB draft pick.

--while expected as the norm in such a situation, even Game 6 of the 2011 World Series showed that not everyone puts their body at risk in order to win a game when the moment comes, but in 2001, Aaron Janssen made a rare pinch-running appearance in the 15<sup>th</sup> inning, and made the most of his only run scored in the entire 2001 season, as he dove in headfirst to the plate to ensure he scored the final run of the 2001 season, giving the Reds the 3-2 win.

--Chris Swain also slid home headfirst to tie up the game 2-2 in the top of the 7<sup>th</sup> inning with two outs. Swain's complete list of heroics throughout 2001-2003 will be written about in the near future.

