

STATE CHAMPS

ever been associated with,” Danley said.

The state championship was the fourth for the Reds and their second in the last four years. But this title was harder to capture than a butterfly in a windstorm.

“This was the toughest one by a lot,” Danley admitted.

The Reds, who won for the 23rd time in 25 games this year, had to overcome the brilliant pitching of Tigers left-hander Sean Thompson, one of the state’s best pitchers in any classification. Before you read any further, let me forewarn you by saying this is not a misprint. Thompson struck out 24 Eaton hitters, that’s right, 24 Reds in his 11 innings on the mound.

“If you told me that I was going to win a game in which we struck out 24 times, I would have said, ‘You’re out of

your mind,’ ” Danley said. “That just couldn’t happen.”

It did.

The Reds didn’t have the lead until the 15th inning. They had one foot in the grave in the seventh inning when Thompson needed one strike with the bases loaded and two out to win the title. Thompson threw a wild pitch that allowed Chris Swain to score the tying run, sending the game into extra innings.

For the first time in the Reds’ four straight trips to the finals, Danley couldn’t rely on what he called the gorilla baseball of the past, when his offense would knock down fences with King-Kong power.

This Eaton version of 2001 managed no extra base hits in the 15 innings against Thompson and reliever Patrick Hill, but they played sparkling defense by committing no

errors against the Tigers.

This Eaton title proved that state championships are as precious as a newborn baby. During the Reds’ four-year run of playing in state title games, they lost once each to Lamar and La Junta, and beat each powerhouse from south-eastern Colorado once. The Reds have won 91 of their last 96 games since 1998, with two of those losses coming in the state title game.

Rumors that Danley would retire after this season are not true. The man who has been the Reds’ head coach since 1972 has no plans to quit coaching.

“This is what I do. I don’t enjoy it just because we win, but it’s something I enjoy doing,” Danley said.

But another title game like the 15-inning affair might just do Danley in. He’s seen it all

during his coaching career, but nothing like what he witnessed Saturday.

“The pressure just built and built and built. It was a character test for both teams and they both passed,” said Danley, who won his 485th game at Eaton and will surpass the magical 500-win mark next season. “It was a marathon. It became less about talent and more about the ability to go up and grind. It was about toughness. It wasn’t about talent after about the ninth or 10th inning.”

Yes, Danley will be back to try to win a fifth state title next season, even though he aged 20 years in one game before he could enjoy his fourth. When Reds pitcher

Scott Souther struck out the last batter for the final out, the Fountain of Youth overcame Danley.

“When the last out was made, he was like a spring chicken jumping around,” Reds assistant coach Randy Sparkman said. “He carried me and picked me up off the ground.”

Danley’s good for at least another 20 years, which in baseballspeak, is another 15-inning, state-championship marathon.

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