

Pitchers battle for title

BY T.M. FASANO
Greeley Tribune

DENVER — For those who witnessed the pitching performance of La Junta left-hander Sean Thompson, they still must be shaking their heads.

For those who missed it, they'll have a hard time believing it.

The 192-pitch, 24-strikeout performance by the La Junta ace is one for the ages at any level. Thompson's performance will be talked about for as long as there is high school baseball in Colorado.

But all Thompson has to show for it when he wakes up this morning is a tired arm and a second-place trophy. Reds right-hander Craig Ayers, who was Thompson's opponent on the mound, didn't get a decision after striking out 15 in 12 innings, but he has a share in the state title trophy.

Thompson also didn't get a decision in Eaton's 3-2 marathon over the Tigers (21-5) in the Class 3A Baseball State Championship game at All-City Stadium Saturday. He left after 11 innings of dominating the Reds (23-2), who scored two runs off him. The Reds scored the winning run on an error in the 15th inning.

"The better team didn't come out on top," said Thompson, who finished his junior season with 147 strikeouts in 76 innings. "We both fought hard. Errors have been haunting us all year. We knew that if we made them it would cost us in the later rounds."

Reds coach Jim Danley has seen his share of great pitchers.

"This kid is not only a college prospect, but a lot of pro teams are following him," Danley said of Thompson. "I've never seen anybody throw with that kind of velocity. After 170-something pitches, he was still throwing harder than anybody here. It was a stunning performance on his part. We matched him with toughness. We don't match him quite with talent."

In Saturday's Greeley Tribune, Thompson said the Reds gave the state title to the Tigers last year after they lost a 6-0 lead. He said the Tigers were going to take the title by themselves this year.

"I think our kids were offended that Thompson said what he said about giving a game away," Danley said. "And I thought Ayers was outstanding on the mound."

Ayers, who threw 179 pitches, said he couldn't believe Thompson struck out 24 Reds. (A total of 26 Reds struck out over the 15 innings, while the Tigers struck out 18 times.)

"That guy is an unbelievable pitcher. If he didn't walk or hit anybody, I don't think anybody could beat him," said Ayers, who ended his senior year striking out 115 hitters in 67 2/3 innings.

Thompson's only mistake was not throwing Reds cleanup hitter Todd Stanclift a curveball when he was leading 2-1 with two outs in the seventh inning. With the bases loaded and the count at one ball, two strikes, Thompson threw a fastball that



LEFT: Eaton High School's Eric Hungenberg, right, celebrates after beating La Junta.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Eaton High School head coach Jim Danley, left, shakes the hand of pitcher Craig Ayers late in the game after Ayers pitched 12 innings.

PHOTOS BY
JIM RYDBOM
Greeley Tribune



Eaton High School's Aaron Janssen, center, is helped into the dugout by teammates Junior Barrios, left, and Garrett Anderson after scoring the winning run to beat La Junta, 3-2, Saturday at Denver's All City Stadium.

hit the backstop and tied the score at 2-2. Stanclift, who struck out four times against Thompson, eventually went down swinging for the third out.

Under high school pitching rules, Thompson and Ayers could go 12 innings.

"He was super. He could have come out for one more inning, but he was done," Tigers coach Mark Lowther said. "That's the decision we had to make."

Stanclift gave credit to Thompson.

"He was better than me at the plate. You don't see (24 strikeouts) in high school," Stanclift said. "He's going to go some-

THOMPSON VS. AYERS

NAME	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	PITCHES
Sean Thompson	11	6	2	2	3	24	192
Craig Ayers	12	7	2	2	6	15	179

where big."

■ **LONGEST EVER ...** The 15-inning, four-hour, 32-minute marathon started at 9:30 a.m. And didn't get over until 2:02 p.m. making it the longest Colorado state title baseball game in any classification. The previous longest game was a 12-inning affair in 1955 when Colorado Springs beat Boulder 7-6 in the Class AA title game.



"I was wondering when it was going to get over," said Scott Souther, who picked up the win. "I've got my graduation party to get to. I'm going to be late."

■ **LOSING PERSPECTIVE ...** Lowther, who was going for the Tigers' second straight title and sixth overall, said the game was a battle.

"It's tough to lose that way. Both teams had their chances to

win and lose," Lowther said. "It just didn't turn out our way. It's hard to get here. It was hard for us to get back. It was a great championship game."

■ **IMPATIENT PITCHER ...** Ayers said sitting and watching after his 12-inning limit was used up wasn't easy.

"Sitting there the last three innings was the worst part of the game," Ayers said.

■ **BIG HIT ...** Tyler Tateyama's second hit of the game turned out to be a big one. The Eaton junior singled with two outs in the 15th inning off La Junta reliever Patrick Hill which set the table for the go-ahead run.

FROM PAGE C1

BASEBALL

reason it felt good. It felt like I wanted to run."

Janssen went in as a pinch-runner for Tyler Tateyama, who singled with two outs against Tigers reliever Patrick Hill in the 15th. After Hill hit Chris Swain setting up a first-and-second situation, Dylan Ramer hit a sure-out ground ball to Tigers third baseman Russell Coates. He promptly let the ball go through his legs and into left field.

Enter Janssen. The speedy sophomore never stopped running around third base and scored the go-ahead run for the Reds.

"At that point, we were going to make them make a play," Reds coach Jim Danley said. "We were going to be aggressive."

It would end up being the winning run in a come-from-behind 3-2 victory over the Tigers in the longest state title game in Colorado history. It was the fourth state title for the Reds, all coming since 1994.

Janssen sat through 11 innings of watching Tigers starter Sean Thompson strike out his Eaton teammates an unbelievable 24 times. He sat through 12 innings of cheering for Reds ace Craig Ayers, who fanned 15 Tigers and allowed just two runs.

Janssen watched as Craig Swain scored the first run for the Reds in the seventh inning on a two-out, two-strike wild pitch from Thompson.

Janssen sat as Scott Souther nearly scored the go-ahead run

in the 13th on a wild pitch, only to be called out at the plate.

No matter how long Janssen had to wait, he was ready to do his part for the good of the team.

Janssen didn't have to score on the center fielder's arm. He scored easily on Coates' error. In what has to be the longest wait of his young life, Janssen scored the winning run in a title game that will go down as the longest ever in Colorado prep baseball history.

EHS 000010 100000001 - 3 9 0
LJHS 100100 000000000 - 2 8 2

EHS - Craig Ayers (7H, 2ER, 6BB, 15SO), Todd Stanclift (13th, 0H, 0ER, 1BB, 2SO), Scott Souther (W, 1-0, 14th, 1H, 0ER, 1BB, 1SO) and Justin Ginther. RBI - Ginther.

LJHS - Sean Thompson (6H, 2ER, 3BB, 24SO), Patrick Hill (L, 4-2, 12th, 3H, 0ER, 2BB, 2SO) and Jace Nimmo. 2B - Darrick Lopez. HR - Aaron Karney (solo in 4th). RBI - Thompson, Karney.



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Eaton High School second baseman Branden Trujillo, left, collides with La Junta's Jace Nimmo while sliding into second base late in the game.