

Four in a row!

Reds beat La Junta for state championship

By Fred Kester

PUEBLO — Eaton's baseball team entered Saturday's Class 3A State Championship game at Pueblo's Runyon Field just wanting to keep their string of state titles alive. Before the game was over, the Reds would find even more incentive (as if they needed it) to win the game.

Eaton beat La Junta 8-5 to win its fourth straight state title and seventh overall. The Reds finish the season at 22-3 and La Junta finishes at 21-4.

The game was a heated contest with emotions on both teams reaching a fever pitch. La Junta's Sean Gleason (arguably the team's best player) took offense to being hit by pitches twice early in the game (even though the pitches that hit him were slow curveballs). Gleason's father, who is an assistant coach for the Tigers, vocalized his displeasure to the umpires to the point of using profanity.

Emotions reached a climax with the Reds leading 8-5 in the bottom of the seventh inning when Eaton first baseman Shane Dyer was injured in a collision with La Junta's Johnathan Apodaca during a groundout. The game was delayed for approximately 20 minutes as paramedics attended to Dyer. During the delay La Junta fans let loose a flurry of verbal abuse directed toward the Reds players.

"La Junta's fans were saying a lot of (stuff) all during the game," Eaton relief pitcher Dusty Dominguez said. "That's okay, though. It just made me mad and made me want to beat them even more."

Once Dyer was taken off the field and order was restored, the Reds were still two outs away from winning the state championship. Dominguez would make sure that La Junta would have no chance for a late rally by getting David Thompson to ground out on the first pitch and by striking out Thomas Baird on three pitches to end the game.

"After Shane got hurt, Dusty told me, 'Six pitches and this game is over,'" Eaton catcher Jared Carlson said. "Dusty got it done with just four pitches. He pitched a heck of a game

today."

Dominguez was the winning pitcher in relief in the state semifinals against Faith Christian. He earned his second victory of the state tournament by pitching five innings of relief. He gave up just one run on one hit and struck out seven batters.

"We ended up wanting to win this game for Shane," Carlson said. "I looked at Shane's arm after he got hurt and I got sick, I had to go get a drink of water. After that, we knew we couldn't lose this game."

The Reds, who were the visiting team and batted first, jumped on La Junta starting pitcher Apodaca early. Travis Anderson led off the game with a single and one pitch later Brett Myatt hit a long double to the fence in left-center field to score Anderson. Reds starting pitcher Josh Noblitt followed with a double to give the Reds a 2-0 lead. After Garrett Walker walked, Jordan Hungenberg hit a double off the first baseman's glove to bring in two more runs.

The Reds added to the lead in the second inning when Myatt walked and scored on Noblitt's second double in as many innings.

Noblitt appeared on his way to escaping the first two innings without giving up a run. But with two outs in the bottom of the second inning, La Junta got back-to-back singles from Aaron Salas and Brandon Salazar, the eighth and ninth batters in the Tigers' batting order. Noblitt then hit Gleason with a knuckle-curve to load the bases. Gabe Fernandez hit a slow roller in front of home plate. Noblitt fielded the ball cleanly, but he overthrew Hungenberg at first base and three runs scored.

"I rushed the throw," Noblitt said. "I knew with bases loaded my first option was to throw to the plate, but Jared had come out to try to get the ball and I knew we wouldn't be able to get the out there. I threw to first and the ball took off on me."

La Junta cut the lead to 5-4 with another unearned run in the third inning. Apodaca reached first on an



The 2004 Class 3A state baseball champion Eaton Reds hold up four fingers signifying their fourth state championship in a row.

Photo by Fred Kester

error. Thompson singled, prompting Eaton coach Jim Danley to bring in Dominguez to pitch. Baird was hit by a pitch to load the bases, then Bryce Wadleigh hit a pop fly to right field which scored Apodaca. Dominguez struck out the next two batters to end the inning.

The Reds added a pair of insurance runs in the fourth inning. Myatt and Noblitt singled, then Dominguez hit a ball over the left fielder's head for a double to bring two runs home.

Dominguez's double would be the game-winning hit as La Junta scored their only earned run of the game in the bottom of the fourth inning. Gleason was hit by a pitch for the second time and he later scored on a single by Apodaca.

Gleason, who pitched all eight innings in La Junta's 2-1 victory over D'Evelyn in the semifinals, relieved Apodaca in the fifth inning. Hungenberg singled off Gleason and later scored on Walker Monfort's single. Gleason didn't allow another base runner the rest of the game.

Dominguez was more than Gleason's equal, however. Dominguez allowed only one baserunner over the last three innings to secure the victory.

"This game came down to which players would be able to keep a level head," Danley said. "You look at what happened on the error that gave them three runs and changed the momentum. We came back and pulled away from them with Dusty's hit and Monfort's hit. I was very pleased with the mental toughness we displayed, because that is what we teach throughout our system."

IT WASN'T ALWAYS THIS EASY: Although Eaton has won four state championships in a row and seven championships in 11 years, Danley's teams didn't win a state championship until his 23rd year at Eaton High School.

"It's crazy, we won something like 325 games here and we lost in three title games before we got that first state championship (in 1994)," Danley said. "For years a state championship seemed like an impossible dream. It's one of those things that when kids start believ-

ing in themselves and they see other classes before them win state, they know it's within reach. We've got a bunch of kids here who feel they need to uphold the tradition."

RARE COMPANY: Only two other schools have won at least four state baseball championships in a row. Cherry Creek won five Class 5A state titles from 1995 to 1999 and Grover won four Class C titles from 1956 to 1959. Revere won five Class A-East titles from 1969 to 1973 and four more from 1976 to 1979. From 1965 to 1977 Class A had both a West and East champion, so it's debatable whether Revere's titles can truly be called a state championship.

Only La Salle/Valley (two as La Salle High, seven as Valley High), Cherry Creek (seven) and Lamar (seven) have as many overall state baseball titles as Eaton. (Revere has 11 championships, but seven of those were Class A-East titles).

MVPs: The Denver Post named Noblitt the Most Valuable Player and the Rocky Mountain News gave the award to Hungenberg.

The North Weld Herald's (unofficial) MVP award goes to two players. Noblitt was the state championship's offensive MVP by going three-for-four with two doubles and two RBIs.

Dominguez earns the overall state

tournament MVP award by being the winning pitcher in both the semifinals and the championship game. In the semifinals Dominguez pitched 2 1/3 innings, giving up just one hit and an unearned run with five strikeouts. In the state championship game Dominguez pitched five innings, giving up one run and one hit with seven strikeouts. He also had the eventual game-winning hit in the state championship.

Class 3A Championship Game
 Eaton 8, La Junta 5
 Eaton 410 210 0 - 8 11 2
 La Junta 031 100 0 - 5 5 0
 Eaton - Josh Noblitt (4H, 0ER, 1BB, 0SO), Dusty Dominguez (W, 7-0, 1H, 1ER, 1BB, 7SO) and Jared Carlson. 2B - Noblitt 2, Brett Myatt 1, Dominguez 1, Jordan Hungenberg 1, RBI - Myatt 2, Noblitt 2, Dominguez 2, Hungenberg 1, Walker Monfort 1.
 La Junta - Johnathan Apodaca (L, 6H, 7ER, 2BB, 2SO), Sean Gleason (5th, 2H, 1ER, 0BB, 5SO) and Bryce Wadleigh. RBI - Apodaca 1, Wadleigh 1.

CHANNEL 4 TO PRESENT BASEBALL TROPHY

MARSHA NEVILLE OF CHANNEL 4 WILL FLY BY HELICOPTER ON TO THE EATON HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL FIELD THURSDAY AFTERNOON, MAY 27 (Call 454-5158 for time) TO PRESENT THE CHANNEL 4 TROPHY FOR BASEBALL'S FOURTH STATE CHAMPIONSHIP IN A ROW. THE PUBLIC IS WELCOME.



Shane Dyer leaves the field in a stretcher after a collision with La Junta's Johnathan Apodaca in the state championship game. Dyer dislocated his shoulder on the play.

Photo by Fred Kester



Eaton catcher Jared Carlson holds up the ball and La Junta's Thomas Baird walks away in disgust after Baird struck out to end the state championship game, then Carlson leaps into the arms of pitcher Dusty Dominguez to begin the celebration.

Photo by Fred Kester