



A Winning Formula

At Eaton High School, old-time methods and values lead to success
by Ted Yeatley

On the seven-mile stretch between Greeley and Eaton, it's as though you travel through a time warp. A journey along this lonely section of Highway 85 in northeast Colorado takes a visitor back to another era — a simpler, more innocent time. Once you see the grain elevator or the pinto bean processing plant that dominate the Eaton skyline, it's as though you've been transported back to 1955.

It's the type of place where you let your guard down. There's a down-home friendliness to the town, one that evokes a feeling of comfort. You can leave your car unlocked and not worry about someone deciding to take it for a joyride. You can send your kids down to the park to play and not be concerned with miscreants lurking in the bushes. You can sit in Steven's Grill, order a double cheeseburger that costs less than three bucks and listen to the locals talk about the weather, Sunday's sermon and sports. It's a peaceful place — a tranquil town.

But, these charming factors aren't the reasons why a trip to Eaton makes you feel like the clock has been turned back nearly a half-century. They simply provide the texture that makes the sensation believable. It's the town's love affair with the sport of baseball that makes you feel like you've stepped out of reality and into "The Sandlot."

It's a place where the game is appreciated, respected, admired and loved. It's a town where kids aspire to don the red and white cap with the capital "E" stitched on the front. It's a burg that isn't hip, cool or trendy. It's a place where traditions still matter and elders are still respected. It's an untouched haven where baseball is still the only game in town.

"It's a tradition that goes on and on," explains Rod Asbra, a longtime Eaton resident who has seen his fair share of Fighting Reds baseball over the years — he drove the team bus to away

games before retiring two years ago. "There are grandsons and great-grandsons playing now, and the former players come back to speak to the team and pass along the legacy."

An afternoon spent with the green grass below your cleats, the feel of a leather mitt against your bare hand and the sweet sounds of the bat striking the ball in the air — that's the heritage in Eaton. That's the connection that binds generations. It's the constant that has remained in place year after year, decade after decade.

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when asked about his deep-seated love for the game. "I always dreamed about one day coming out here and playing, too."

It's a place where kids aspire to follow in the footsteps of their predecessors, carrying on the grand tradition of Eaton baseball.

"Of course, winning helps," Asbra admits. Ah, yes. The winning.

Success is the common thread that is woven throughout every baseball-related tradition in Eaton. It's the reason why paintings of the team hang on the

walls in Steven's joint. It's the basis for the quasi-celebrity status the players enjoy when walking the city's streets. It's what motivates the town's elementary kids to hang out in the high school dugouts during the summer. And it's why nearly everybody in town turns out to watch the Fighting Reds home games. Winning is the glue that holds this vestige of a bygone era together.

In Eaton, one man receives and deserves most of the credit for creating a utopia built on an unprecedented run of baseball achievement — head coach Jim Danley. Players have come and gone since he took over the program in 1972 — some great, some good and some only slightly above average. No matter what the talent level,

In the 31 years leading up to the 2003 season, Danley's teams have won nearly 80% of their games — a clip that is difficult to comprehend and fathom over that amount of time. In the process, the Fighting Reds have built a 506-133-1 record and won five state championships. They've played in five consecutive CHSAA title games — winning three, including the last two — and posted a perfect 24-0 mark in 1998. All the while, they've become the pride and joy of a small town situated on the plains just seven miles north of Greeley.

This type of success begs the question — how do they do it? How does a small school win on such a consistent basis? If they rode a flame-throwing lefty or a farm-fed power hitter for a couple of years, that would be one thing. But, Eaton wins no matter who's on the roster. There has to be a secret.

Again, all clues point in the direction of Danley. He's the man that has developed a winning formula, an approach that works year after year. While other schools and other coaches work to build a single team, Danley has spent more than three decades assembling a program at Eaton — a method of teaching baseball that extends well beyond his current varsity roster. It

permeates through every level, starting with the first time a youngster picks up a bat.

"Jim has total control of the summer program — from five-year olds on up," says Dale Hughes.

"Put me in coach, I'm ready to play. Look at me, I can be, centerfield."
- John Faggery

"Growing up with Denver Bears baseball, a day at the ballpark was truly a special moment. Baseball became my passion. Unfortunately, I was unable to adjust to the curveball while following it through the facemask."
- Adventure Guy



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This system forges a bond between kids from different age groups and allows for the legacy of Eaton High School baseball to be passed along to the next wave of players. To Danley, the benefits extend well beyond the baseball diamond.

"They are positive role models that do a lot of teaching that doesn't have anything to do with baseball," he says. "In a small town, the little kids know the guys on the high school team by their first names. The young kids are always welcome in our dugout. It makes it look like a Turkish rug sale, but it's a great thing."

This also creates a situation where Danley's system is being instilled from day one. By the time these kids step onto the diamond as Fighting Reds, they're well-schooled in the ways of Eaton baseball.

"Having our kids go back and coach in the summer is huge," Danley says about this invaluable practice of extending his system through all age groups. "We don't have to re-teach because kids are learning the same things all the way through. It gives us consistency. The techniques are taught by kids who have been taught."

This steadiness extends well beyond the fundamentals and the basics, however. Danley and his coaches have developed a game plan for winning over the past 31 years and they begin instilling the basis of this program into players at an early age.

In its simplest form, baseball is a game made up of two key components — pitching and hitting. Well aware of this fact, the Eaton coaching staff has crafted a formula for tackling both disciplines

that works no matter who's on the mound or in the batter's box.

Anybody can look like a great coach when the next Randy Johnson or Nolan Ryan is throwing gas at their opponents, they reason. And anybody can send Barry Bonds up to the plate and tell him to hack away. But these types of phenomenal talents come along once in a generation. Danley wanted to find a way to take these variables out of his success equation. He didn't want to rely on Mother Nature to provide him with a pitcher or slugger that could lead Eaton to victories.

Thus, the search began. For starters, Danley wanted to be able to craft a dominant hurler. He set out to find a way to turn a kid with average physical traits into a feared commodity on the mound. It was a journey that would take him to all corners of the baseball world.

"In the late 80s, we began looking for a power pitcher that could be taught," Danley says in explaining the pitching odyssey that has led to success at Eaton. "Knowing that we're not going to be able to have good arms year in and year out, we looked for a non-speed pitcher that is a strike-out pitcher. We found a guy at Oklahoma State that was teaching the knuckle-curve."

Danley began to study the pitch at length. He read about it. He talked to coaches and players about it. He analyzed the pros and cons. In the end, he fell in love with it. He knew it was the golden ticket that he'd been searching for.

"They threw it a lot in the Major Leagues in the 1920s and 30s," he explains with satisfaction, like a proud father describing his son's latest exploits. "It's been around a long time, but it's always been thought to be an old man's pitch."

Visions of the Niekro, Phil and Joe, come to mind when discussing the knuckle ball — long considered a "junk" pitch that guys use to stay in the game long after they've thrown every last fastball their arm can bear. It seems gimmicky — like a trick that could be used for awhile but would eventually run its course. Judging by the results in Eaton, however, opposing teams are failing to catch on to the ruse. Since 1987, the Fighting Reds have amassed a mark of 307 wins and only 55 losses, quieting the critics in the process.

"It's become our signature pitch," says Danley, defending the merits of his beloved toss. "It's the hard knuckler. It breaks very sharply, even in this climate. It's a great pitch for this area because it rarely goes up there and stops."

In other words, it's controllable. It's not dependent on heavy or humid air, and it can be thrown by someone with less than supernatural God-given ability. It's a consistent out-pitch that Danley and his coaches can teach their players to throw. It's the backbone of the Fighting Reds baseball system.

While the knuckle-curve has provided the foundation for Eaton's success, a patient approach to hitting has been nearly as important. Other teams swing for the fences and try to score in bunches. Danley's teams simply try to put the ball in play, keep rallies alive and force the opponent into making mistakes — a mentality is echoed by everyone in town.

"Home run hitters kill rallies," says Asbra, now just a fan. "These guys play for rallies."

And it's an approach that is ingrained in the players on a daily basis.

"To Coach Danley, hitting is an art," says Brandon Trujillo, Eaton's senior

shortstop and an All-State candidate. "We hit until we can't hit anymore. It's been the exact same practice schedule since I was a freshman."

A major part of this routine is learning to hit when behind in the count, because the worst thing that an Eaton hitter can do is strike out. If they are able to put the ball in play, the coaches reason, anything can happen. Thus, each player is taught the same technique for hitting with two strikes.

"Dale Hughes teaches an outstanding two-strike hitting technique," explains Danley. "It's a lot like Dante Bichetti's swing. You spread the stance, flatten the bat and don't take a stride. This takes away the high fastball."

The esteemed coach talks about hitting like a sommelier discusses wine or a virtuoso describes music. He exudes a passion for the subject that is contagious. He's excited to share his knowledge. He relishes the opportunity to expound upon his favorite subject.

This love of baseball and the various nuances

of the game are passed along to his players and they are clearly buying into the method.

"He has a plan for us," says senior Mike Julia with confidence. "We don't have power hitters, we just hit the ball. Protect the plate, choke up and hit the ball to the opposite field."

To a man, the Fighting Reds speak the gospel according to Danley. They love their coach and they believe in his ways. "We do the fundamentals well — the little things that Coach Danley tries to instill in every player," says Trujillo. "We focus on the things that other teams don't spend time on or even think about."

With these skills and techniques instilled in his players, Danley is able to move on to working on the final aspect of his program — forging a winning attitude.

In an era where competition is far from en vogue in other parts of the country, it is still embraced in Eaton. Borrowing a mentality from generations gone by, Danley and the townspeople still want to win.

"We make no apologies about striving for success," says the head coach. "We think success is a very important thing, teaching lessons that can be carried on into every possible profession. We're a part of the educational process and a reason why people are successful later in life."

As the Fighting Reds take to the field in 2003, they will be trying to extend their run of excellence. With two consecutive state championships to their credit, it won't be an easy task.

"Every team is gunning for us," admits Trujillo. "The other teams know our reputation."

And they all know that the road to a title runs through Eaton — a town where time stands still and baseball is much more than just a game. ■



"Red, it took me sixteen years to get here. You play me, and I'll give ya the best I got."
- Robert Hofford as Ray Hobbs in "The Natural"

"Yeah, I was in The Show. I was in The Show for 21 days once — the 21 greatest days of my life. You never handle your luggage in The Show, somebody else carries your bags. You hit white balls for batting practice, the ballparks are like cathedrals, the hotels all have room service, and the women all have long legs and brains."
- Kevin Costner as Crash Davis in "Bull Durham"



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In Eaton, baseball is still the favorite pastime. The game is the heartbeat of the community. While suburban kids are playing street hockey, riding their skateboards or being picked up by mom after soccer practice, youngsters in this slice of Americana gather in the center of town to play a game of pick-up hardball on a spring afternoon. While the fate of the local football team usually gets the juices flowing, passions run high in Eaton about the performance on the diamond by the Fighting Reds – the town's high school baseball team. The conversations at the local burger joint steer away from the Broncos offseason moves, the Avs playoff possibilities or the latest political scandal. Instead, the regulars talk about the virtues of the sacrifice bunt, the value of the hit-and-run and the lost art of the complete game.

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In the 31 years leading up to the 2003 season, Danley’s teams have won nearly 80% of their games – a clip that is difficult to comprehend and fathom over that amount of time. In the process, the Fighting Reds have built a 506-133-1 record and won five state championships. They’ve played in five consecutive CHSAA title games – winning three, including the last two – and posted a perfect 24-0 mark in 1998. All the while, they’ve become the pride and joy of a small town situated on the plains just seven miles north of Greeley.

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Note: Following the release of this article, the Reds went on to win the Class 3A State Championship in 2003, then the American Legion B State Championship that summer, then the Class 3A State Championship again in 2004, as well as the American Legion B State Championship again that year. The Reds won all 6 Spring and Summer State Championships from 2002-2004.