

GARRETT WALKER – 2004 GRADUATE – EATON REDS

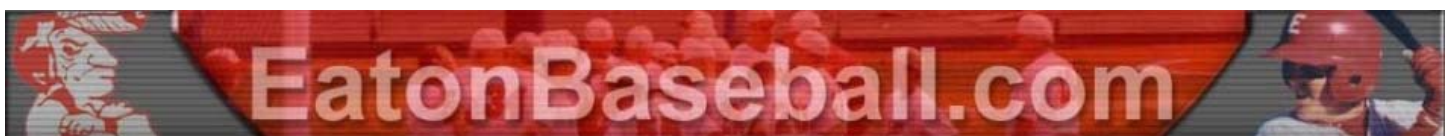
THIS IS EATON BASEBALL

It takes a little under 5 seconds to run from the outfield into a State Championship pileup. Those that have had that experience would call it the greatest 5 seconds of their lives. After having had this experience occur a remarkable 3 times already within a span of 15 months, Garrett Walker then tore his ACL in the football season of his senior year. He underwent extensive surgery involving both knees in December, and with baseball season starting in less than 75 days, one would expect an athlete to simply have to sit out the upcoming season while rehabilitating from the surgery. That thought never crossed the mind of Garrett Walker, as when doctors told him it would be 6-8 months, he heard 3 months, max. They told him there was not a chance he would be playing baseball this coming spring, and all he heard was there wasn't a chance he wouldn't be leaping into his 4th straight pileup by the end of the spring. Garrett might not be the best at listening to doctors, but he certainly is one of the all-time greats at fighting through pain to go fight the good fight one more time, one last time.

After tearing his ACL in November, he quickly went to the doctors to make sure to get the clock started on his return to the playing field. Returning for the football state tournament had no chance, as it was already underway, and the doctors said he wouldn't make it back in time for baseball either. Walker's response: "Well, I am going to play this spring, so get me on a rehab plan like what a professional athlete would have, as I don't have a lot of time here to waste, the State Championship Game is on May 22nd." Being a sports family, the Walkers understood that Garrett was simply going to make this happen, and got him signed up for a new, experimental at the time, type of rehab program.

He had surgery the first week of December and immediately started rehab. By immediately, we mean immediately. After waking up from surgery, the first thing Walker heard was a nurse saying "alright, time to start training with the sandbags." Walker was instantly moving around, working up to walking with full weight on his legs in under 2 hours after surgery. He went to rehab, every day, only skipping for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Garrett still worked out on his own on those days, as this wasn't just a wish to get back to play ball in time for spring, it wasn't even a goal; it was instead simply something that was going to happen come hell or high water. It is commonly said that success breeds success, and in this case, Walker's rapid pace of recovery throughout December and January had the doctors all wondering how this was happening, and wanting to be a part of this great recovery, thereby providing even more assistance to tweaking his rehab routine to get Walker ready to go.

To truly appreciate Garrett's comeback, it must first be understood what a resume he had already created for himself as a junior in 2003. The Reds won the State Championship, their 3rd straight. Walker batted .434 and was amongst the team leaders in every offensive category. The Reds pulled off two of their greatest postseason comebacks in history, first after trailing by 7 runs with 6 outs to go, and second by trailing by 2 runs and down to their last pitch—in both games Walker led off the 7th inning with a hit to come around to score a key run to keep the Reds' season alive. In the State Championship Game, Walker had two-out RBI hits in the 2nd and 3rd innings, and caught a seemingly uncatchable ball and doubled off the runner to preserve the lead he had helped create offensively. Prior to that, he hit a 9th inning 3-run home run to wrap up the league championship over University. He kept the season alive in Districts with the key RBI single to beat Roosevelt. Then in the summer of 2003, he helped lead the Reds to a 2nd straight Legion B State Title by breaking a 6th inning tie in the first round of State over Northridge, en route to the Reds then going on to beat Evergreen twice to win the Legion B State Championship. Before this injury occurred, Walker had already had a dream career.



But his career wasn't over yet. Garrett had seen a teammate and star player in 2002 break his arm late in the season and have to watch the Reds win State; Garrett had the time to make sure that he wouldn't be in the dugout watching. And with this time, Walker used up nearly every waken moment of it to get ready for one last shot at winning it all.

As the Reds' started indoor practices, Walker wanted to see where he stood amongst the other Reds' starters. Contrary to myth, the Reds actually do run, even if sparingly. Walker raced the other Reds and finished in the top 3, much to the astonishment of Coach Danley, who bewilderedly asked Garrett: "Top 3, Walker? Really?" The coaches had just hoped that maybe Walker would get to the point where he could deliver a few clutch pinch hits late in the season, but Walker was now on path to play a complete season at the plate and in the outfield. Walker would never accept less than first place, though this third place finish in practice sprints was a motivational step on the way to recovery.

When asked by the media for spring preview write-ups what the season would be like with only one senior, ace pitcher Dusty Dominguez, Coach Danley quickly corrected them that the Reds would be sporting two senior stars. Many coaches would consider lowering expectations for Walker and just mention that they hoped to have Walker back in time for the postseason but that he probably wouldn't be anywhere near the player he was as a junior in 2003. But Coach Danley saw the fire in Walker's eyes, and knew of the dedication he had to playing through the pain to make this happen, so Danley responded to a question about Walker's health with: "Garrett Walker at half speed is still better than most of the players in this league."

Truth is, Walker was closer to 75% of his old self, which put him amongst the best players in the state. Did Walker put up the ridiculous statistics that he had as a junior and lead the team in nearly every category? Nope. Were there times where it almost hurt just to watch him hobble between bases and turn awkwardly to catch flyballs over his head? Absolutely. But none of that mattered as he helped lead the team to another undefeated League Championship entering the playoffs. The Reds then just had two District Tournament games that mattered, and the Reds easily defeated Burlington and Weld Central to guarantee a spot in the State Tournament. The Reds didn't win the District Championship Game, but it didn't matter, as they had done enough to earn a shot to win their 4th straight spring Title.

The following weekend, the Reds trailed Valley 3-2 in the 6th inning of the Regional Championship, before Walker, as he had done in each of the key comebacks in 2003, led off the inning with a single, and later hustled in to score on a wild pitch to tie the game, as the Reds rallied to win and head back to the Final Four. After a win over Faith Christian, Walker was in the game that he had circled back on December 4th when he headed into surgery, as he was playing once again in the State Championship Game. In the first inning, Walker drew a key walk as part of a Reds' 4-run rally, before sprinting in to catch an inning-ending flare with multiple La Junta runners on base. The Reds would then extend this lead to 5-0 and ultimately win the game 8-5. As the last strikeout was recorded, Walker came sprinting in from leftfield, and while still operating at less than 100%, that just meant he got the glory of being the last one to jump atop the State Championship pileup. Garrett's dream of 5 more seconds of State Championship euphoria maybe required 6 seconds instead, but was otherwise perfect—the way he had dreamed it as he lay on a surgery table, and the way he had determined it would be in the days, weeks, and months of hard work he put into getting back onto the field, playing through pain and at times hobbling between bases and on catches, but simply doing anything to win.

