

A legion baseball season to remember

Most fans would agree that the recently-completed American Legion baseball season was exceptional. But it's the kind of year Kings Mountain people have come to expect from Coach Bruce Clark and his young men.

Clark took over the local high school program four years ago and immediately turned it into a big winner. Since 1989, the Mountaineers have won two Southwestern 3-A Conference and one state championship and has not finished lower than second place.

In 1990, American Legion Post 155, under the very capable leadership of athletic director Jimmy Littlejohn, reorganized its baseball program amid speculation of rival programs that it was doing so just to take advantage of the talent from that '89 state championship team and predictions that the team would fold after one year.

However, the legion baseball officials said at the time -- and have continued to say to this day -- that their goal was to work hand-in-hand with Coach Clark's high school program to give local fans some of the best baseball in North Carolina.

Looking back, fans now see that goal materializing.

In just three short legion campaigns, Kings Mountain has already established itself as one of the top programs in the state. In 1990, Post 155 compiled a 17-10 record and advanced to the Area IV Western Division championship series before being eliminated by the eventual state champion, Caldwell County.

This summer, Post 155 won its first-ever division crown (the Central Division) and advanced to the Area IV championship series for only the second time in history. Kings Mountain lost that series to Taylorsville but finished with 21 victories, an all-time Kings Mountain legion record.

Coach Clark and his able assistant, Ronny Funderburke, were able to accomplish that record while drawing from just one high school while most of their competitors draw from at least three schools.

"This has been a great year for us," says Clark, whose players compiled an overall record of 42-17 in high school and legion play. "We hope that the legion success this summer will carry over into next year's high school season. I think everybody's expecting us to be extremely good next year, and that feeling not only comes from the community but from the coaching staff as well."

While most legion teams depend on several players from many different schools, Clark isn't complaining that he only gets players from Kings Mountain. In fact, he feels it's an asset because the players are used to playing together and they get along well.

"The legion program has been a tremendous help to our high school program, and that was the intention of the legion program from the very beginning," he said. "A lot of the credit has to go to the legionnaires, especially Jimmy Littlejohn and his efforts as athletic director to bring legion baseball back to Kings Mountain. They have been quite supportive and I think it's a tribute to this community to have that particular organization interested in high school athletics. I'd also like to thank Coach Funderburke for all of his efforts and time and hard work; and all the legionnaires who worked in different capacities, whether it be announcing games or taking up tick-



Coach Bruce Clark gives pitching tips to Robert Wingo.

ets or working in the concession stand; Kings Mountain High School and Principal Jackie Lavender for allowing us to use the high school facilities; and the Kings Mountain Herald and their continued coverage and support of both high school and legion baseball. It's been a total effort by a lot of good people, and I think that those type efforts will continue if we as coaches continue to get the quality people that we've been able to get during the past four years."

Clark used this legion season to experiment with several players at different positions and he feels it will pay great dividends in high school ball next year. He developed some outstanding pitching talent and his hitters got some valuable experience batting against some of the top pitchers in the area.

"It has given us increased hope about next year," he said. "People like Rick Marr came on strong as pitchers and Robert Wingo and Kevin Melton, both ninth graders,

got some unbelievable experience and they will definitely be a positive factor for us next year in high school. The regulars just continued to get a tremendous amount of experience. When you've got people getting in over 100 at-bats against the type pitching we faced you can't help but think that high school ball will be much better.

"We were very impressed with our pitching staff," he added. "It was great to see Tommy Payne and Donald Bell end their legion careers with such a successful season. Both have aspirations to play at the collegiate level next year, Payne at Western Carolina and Bell is at the present looking for a place to play. Shane Webb and David R. Jenkins, both due to age, will not be playing legion ball next year but they gained valuable experience for themselves for next year's high school season.

"As for hitting, we found our best 1-2 combination that we've had since Coach Funderburke and I took over the program in Mike

Smith and Todd Ware. We'll start off next year with those two leading off and batting second. Caja Ormand moved up to the three spot in the lineup and that seemed to help us tremendously because we could then put David R. Jenkins and the four spot, and really a lot of possibilities are created after the fourth spot since Caja has been able to increase his level of play."

Smith led the club in hitting with a .367 average, followed closely by Ormand at .355, David R. Jenkins .339, Melton .333 and Marr .313. Stephen Fisher led the mound staff with a 6-2 record and 81 innings pitched and Marr was close behind with a 5-2 mark and 57 2/3 innings or work.

Post 155 began its legion season two nights after the high school team ended the state playoffs, and won the Central Division with a 12-6 record. They defeated Forest City, Shelby and Pineville in the first three rounds of the playoffs to advance to the Area IV finals against Western Division champion Taylorsville.

"I don't think anybody gave us a chance to finish fifth in the state while drawing from just one school," Clark said. "But we feel like this program is one of the best in the state and we feel like this season is indicative of just how strong our program is becoming. The fear after this much success is that sometimes it's got to end, but

our efforts as coaches will be to continue to look for the kids that will provide the character and success that we've seen over the last four years. Some people and coaches today say that all the good kids are gone, but we believe very strongly that there are still a great deal of good people who can play sports and can contribute to a program that we've tried very hard to build."

Clark said a big key to the success of legion and high school ball in Kings Mountain in recent years has been a well-rounded summer baseball program in the City Recreation Department. "We've been told that this year there were more young kids participating in recreation baseball than ever before. So you've got to think that the tradition will continue."

Clark said, in the end, Post 155 just "ran out of steam" after playing almost nightly since the end of the high school season.

"If we could have had four or five days off just to get away from the game for awhile and get some rest, there's no doubt in my mind that we were as good or better than Taylorsville," he said. "If they had an edge it was in pitching, but we normally played great defense, and didn't in that series, and we normally came through with clutch hits, but didn't. We really believe that that was a result of fatigue and not a lack of interest or effort."

Clark said many people have tried to compare this year's team with the 1989-90 players who won the state championship and clubbed a state record 55 home runs during the '89 high school campaign.

"We knew that this team wouldn't be a home run hitting team," he said, "but that it would be a good base-hitting, defensive team that would be more of a traditional baseball team. That has been the case. In legion ball we had 21 home runs in 33 games. We feel the home run category will increase next year because our kids will be a year older and a year stronger, and a lot of our players are just on the verge of being home run hitters. But we will not go into the high school season counting on the home run to win games. We will continue to work on great defense and clutch hitting."

"If you base your future on pitching -- which nearly everybody does -- our team next year should be as good as any team that has come through Kings Mountain," he added. "We'll have five very good pitchers and three others who can come in and spot pitch. Most people can't say that."

With all 19 players returning off his high school team, which compiled a 21-5 record and went three rounds in the state playoffs, and 17 of 21 returning in legion ball, Clark can look forward to another big year in 1993.

Final Post 155 averages

Player	AB	H	HR	AVG.
Mike Smith	128	47	0	.367
Caja Ormand	124	44	4	.355
David R. Jenkins	103	35	3	.339
Kevin Melton	48	16	1	.333
Rick Marr	96	30	2	.313
Donald Bell	47	13	3	.277
Chris Rider	69	19	0	.275
Doran Moore	72	19	1	.264
Todd Ware	127	32	0	.252
Robert Wingo	20	5	0	.250
TeeGee Goforth	43	10	0	.233
Tommy Payne	96	22	6	.229
Stephen Fisher	109	25	1	.229
David C. Jenkins	9	2	0	.222
Robbie Ruff	8	1	0	.125
Shane Webb	10	1	0	.100
Johnny Bunch	3	0	0	.000
Benji Ingle	2	0	0	.000

Pitcher	W-L	IP	Saves	Games	Starts
Stephen Fisher	6-2	81.0	2	12	9
Rick Marr	5-2	57.2	1	12	8
David C. Jenkins	3-1	27.1	1	10	2
Shane Webb	2-0	19.2	1	11	1
Tommy Payne	2-2	34.1	1	7	5
Robert Wingo	2-3	37.2	3	12	4
Donald Bell	1-0	19.2	0	9	0
David R. Jenkins	0-1	17.2	1	5	3
Benji Ingle	0-1	4.1	0	1	1

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