

The Journey to The Summit

The top of Mount Everest, at over 29,000 feet above sea level, had never been reached before Edmund Hillary set foot atop it in 1953. However he did not accomplish this great feat on his own, nor even solely with the help of his local climbing guide, his fellow climbers, or the more than 350 members of the expedition that carried the 10,000 pounds of gear and set up various camps along the ascent to the top. In fact, this was not even Edmund Hillary's first trip to Mount Everest as he had been there each of the two years before to try to climb the mountain. Explorers had been attempting it since 1922 when 7 climbers died in that initial effort. Additional expeditions throughout the next 3 decades all failed to reach the set goal, but inspired future climbers to take the lessons learned from their mentors to find a way to reach the very top. On May 29, 1953, Edmund Hillary reached this great height for the first time in history. Upon his descent, his first words to a fellow long-time Mount Everest adventurer were "Well, George, we knocked the bastard off."



This team sentiment of having won a great victory that had been in the making for more than a generation was shared by the members of the 1994 Eaton Reds Baseball team that – after many attempts by their heroes and mentors of the past – brought home the State Championship Trophy. These players returned to their feet after a pileup to see the entire crowd descend from the stands to take the field. A number of those within the crowd that were the first to congratulate the 1994 squad were players from previous years; some had been teammates on previous years' teams, many had been coaches for the players when they were younger, all had been mentors and heroes and – while working to have reached the top of the mountain themselves and failed in that lofty pursuit – had paved the way for future players to strive further and reach higher than they had done. The relief shared by Edmund Hillary to his friend George was also shared by the 1994 Reds with Reds from previous years.

The 1994 State Championship though, as great as it was, only put the Reds at the top for a brief period of time, as others had won this battle before and would be competing for it against the Reds again soon. The Reds were only at the pinnacle for a moment, and had a lot of work to do to stay atop this pinnacle. Another State Championship the following year along with a summer State Championship in 1997 and an undefeated season in 1998 certainly placed the Reds among the top programs in the State, but did not leave the Reds alone atop the mountain. There were many achievements not yet accomplished by the Reds, and there were many young players who could be groomed to be even better players, and win even more consistently, than the Reds' varsity players of the time. The Reds' Mount Everest had been climbed once, but would need to be climbed again, and again, and again. The Reds would go on to do this, but only because the Reds from the 1970's, 1980's, and early 1990's had established a base camp high along the ridge.



Edmund Hillary's climb of Mount Everest was not something that he had simply been born to accomplish. While he would go on to be knighted for this achievement and become officially known as Sir Edmund Hillary, he had not grown up as royalty with great monies to spend on adventure, nor even as some great athlete. He was initially smaller than most of his peers in high school and even once he grew, he became gangly and uncoordinated. He received only average grades, and was relatively shy and kept to himself. He did not outwardly stand out amongst his peers.

Wild Running, Huge Risks Taken to Try to Pull off Wins in the Early 1970's

This is not an inaccurate description of what the Reds looked like in 1972 as they took the field as well, fresh off a season in which they had to win a doubleheader late in the year against Weld Central to avoid being in last place in the league standings in 1971. But these Reds wanted to reach higher, and worked hard to do so. They played a style of baseball that doesn't look much like the Reds' teams of recent years, these Reds had to take great risks as they were not as sure-handed of fielders, and they didn't have multiple dominant pitchers, nor did they have the ability to explode offensively. They stole bases, even third base. They intentionally got picked off 1st base with a runner on 3rd base to then try to steal home. They bunted, not just sacrificing players to 2nd base, but also suicide squeezes. They made all sorts of mistakes, but they gave it their all and showed the rest of the league that things weren't going to be in the future as they had been in the past. They were underdogs in nearly every game they played, but they woke up each morning thinking that today might just be their day to pull off an upset.



1972, 1973, 1974, and 1975 Reds

Wearing pinstripes for the first time in Reds' history, the 1972 Reds swept then-perennial State contender Highland to start the league season, and went on to lose only to the top team of that decade, Valley, as well as earn a split with Fort Lupton after losing a 3-2 game with them. The Reds were up in that game 2-1 going into the bottom of the 7th inning, but failed to close out the win that (later it would be determined) would have given them sole possession of 2nd place just one year after finishing second to worst. No one had expected them to win, but when they got a chance against Fort Lupton again later in the year, the Reds scored each of their first 6 batters of the game and then with the game tied in the 4th inning, they scored 4 straight runs, and then scored another 6 runs in the 5th inning to stave off some late rallies by the more dominant team. The Reds acted like they were supposed to win this game, even though everyone else knew better. The Reds didn't care, and they put together a 6-game win streak to finish the season. In the summer, many of these players coached and mentored the younger players that were playing at levels from T-Ball up through Junior Legion. All of these younger players took notice of the improvement in the way the Reds played the game and

their mental approach to disciplined at-bats and to not fearing failure and giving it their all to try to overcome huge obstacles. The following year, one of the Reds from the 1972 team went on to throw a no-hitter, the first in Reds' history, against the perennially stronger Fort Lupton squad. Few things say dominance like having a no-hitter thrown at you, and this was a huge confidence builder for the Reds to know that they had some pitching that could win them games even when they didn't hit well. The Reds though didn't strike fear into many opponents just yet, but they had younger players that were picking up on their older heroes' habits.

The First League Championship and First Regional Championship

The Junior Legion players that had been coached by this first group of Reds' players dared mighty dreams, and when their chance came to play Varsity baseball in 1976, they started off the league schedule with a 4-3 win over highly-touted Highland, which was expected to be the top team in the State that year. This was an upset of huge proportions. After dropping the 2nd game, the Reds then went on to sweep through the rest of their league opponents facing only one more loss that put the Reds in a tie for the League Title with Highland at the end of the regular season. This created a one-game tiebreaker for the League Championship, something the Reds could not have imagined being in just 5 years earlier. The Reds then received quite possibly their most dominant pitching performance in a big game throughout the entire decade, as the Reds carried a perfect game into the 6th inning and with a one-out single, allowed the only batter of the game to reach base as the Reds won the League Championship by a 6-0 score. This was completely uncharted territory for the Reds, and a huge milestone in the evolution of the Program.

The Reds then defeated Weld Central with 4 runs in the final two innings to qualify for the State Tournament for the first time. The Reds were starting to expect to win and to work hard to ensure that they did not slip up. The following weekend, the Reds hosted Denver Lutheran for a one-game Regional playoff (back then only 8 teams qualified for State), and while the Reds only managed two hits on the day, they had disciplined at-bats and fouled off two-strike pitches to draw 9 walks and took 2 hit-by-pitches to score 6 runs and win 6-2 for the first Regional Championship and Final Four Appearance in Reds' history. Highland would get the better of the Reds by a large margin the next week and would go on to win the State Championship as expected, but the Reds had shown that they could stay on the field with anyone and even win a League Championship.

The euphoria for these achievements was much greater than what is even experienced now by Reds' teams that win State, as the odds were much more against the Reds back then for even winning a single League Championship. The Reds now have 35 League Championships since this time.



1976 Reds win 1st State Tournament game in Program's history

Knocking Off Valley

But in the 1970's, the championships for the Reds weren't expected and didn't build year-after-year upon one another. The example of playing like a winner though did build upon itself from year to year and from high school hero to junior league future star to the little leaguer that dreamt of his day in the pinstripes. The Reds had not defeated Valley in spring games throughout the decade, and throughout spring and summer games in 1978 the Reds lost all four games to Valley by a combined score of 47-8. The first game of the 1979 season appeared to look the same as the Reds were down 4-0 going into the bottom of the 1st inning against Valley. But then the Reds scored 5 runs of their own in their half of the inning by drawing walks and receiving timely hits, as well as even stealing third base along the way. The Reds then gave back the lead to Valley over the next two innings and it would appear to most that the dominant Valley team should go on to win, especially when Valley led by two runs with two outs in the 7th inning, but then the Reds hit some balls hard and capitalized on a couple of errors and scored twice to send the game into extra innings. Valley loaded the bases with only one out in the 8th inning, but the Reds got out of the jam, and then in the bottom of the 8th inning, the Reds drew a 2-out bases-loaded walk to win the game and pull off the huge upset. While this was a non-league game, it carried more weight than any league game in the minds of the Reds as they had beaten the defending State Champion (and team that would also go on to win State again that year).



1979 Reds

Start of Consecutive League Title Streak

The 1979 team went on to win the League Championship with a 9-1 league record. The Reds were not yet dominant, nor even an obvious choice as one of the top teams competing for the League Title. But that was changing, and the Reds grew more confident and started turning League Championships into the routine, rather than the exception. The 1979 League Championship was the first of 12 straight League Titles, and in the only two years since that time that the Reds haven't won League, the Reds still went on to win Regionals and play in the State Championship Game, including a State Championship victory in 2008. But that future for the Reds wasn't clear in 1979, the only thing that was clear was that the Reds were no longer just dreaming of trying to upset another team for the League Championship, but instead could see themselves having a shot at winning it again in 1980. And the Reds did win League again in 1980, and even posted another no-hitter as the pitching improved at Eaton, but ended the season for the 2nd straight year with a loss to Valley in Districts and to Burlington in Regionals. The Reds wanted more.

The Start of League Dominance

Going into 1981, the Reds were the two-time defending League Champions, but hadn't won a game at State since 1976. The Reds started off the season with an 8-game winning streak, and then after splitting with University, went on to win the next 8 games to secure the League Championship and advance to the District Championship Game. During this streak, the Reds knocked off Valley 5-1 at home by scoring 5 runs in the 1st inning and turned in a dominant pitching performance by the Reds' ace pitcher. Though this game was non-league, the Reds showed the heart and determination

to knock off a Valley team that was riding a 42-game win streak. Little could it be known at the time, but the Reds' future players that were born in 1981 benefited greatly from this win, as it ended Valley's win streak, and when those newborn Reds' grew up to take the field 17 years later, they would go on to win 45 straight games to eclipse Valley's state record. Had it not been for this win in 1981, the 1998-1999 Reds' 45 straight wins might not have been enough to set the record.

The 1981 Reds' team then faced Burlington again for an elimination game, and this time did not leave Burlington any chance to end the Reds' season as a no-hitter – and near perfect game – was thrown by the Reds with 15 strikeouts recorded, while the Reds' first 5 batters of the game reached base and scored 3 runs. Many teams would see their pitcher throwing a dominant game and coast with a 3-0 lead, but the Reds started acting like a team that understood the importance of putting more nails in the coffin and manufactured 3 more runs to secure the victory.

The Start of the Tradition of Beating Future Pro Pitchers

The next challenge though was a formidable one, and the Reds had to face a top Major League pitching prospect that would go on to play professionally. After striking out 8 times through the first 4 innings, the Reds led off with a single and then after a walk and a double steal, scored 2 runs on a 2-out hit to break the 0-0 tie. The Reds held on and won the game 3-1 and advanced to the Final Four for the 2nd time in Eaton history. The Reds' chance to make it to the State Championship Game though would end with a bad 3rd inning against Rifle. The Reds went on to play a 3rd place game later in the day, and while it appeared the disappointed Reds would lose after trailing 6-1 going into the 6th inning, the Reds came back and scored 10 runs in the 6th inning on just one out to storm back to at least finish State in 3rd place. But as great and unexpected as the season was, a 3rd place finish was still disappointing and made the Reds want it even more. The Reds would have the next season ended abruptly by Fort Lupton in the District Tournament and would fail to qualify for the State Tournament. Little did they know that this was the last time that the Reds would fail to reach State, as the Reds have qualified each year since.

The endings to the 1981 and 1982 seasons were very disappointing for the Reds, as they now saw that they were one of the teams that could compete for a State Championship. The odds were still greatly against them, but they were no longer just another team, they were favorites to win League, and had a real chance at winning State Tournament games.

Setting Sights Higher

Edmund Hillary first set his sights atop large mountains at the age of 16, as the gangly and uncoordinated school kid realized on a school hiking trip that he had greater endurance and strength than his classmates. Only four years later, he climbed his first major peak. Six years after that, he was fighting in World War II for his native New Zealand Air Force, working in conjunction with the Americans, British, and Australians to fight off the Japanese. He was badly injured and burned, but rather than having that experience make him settle for less, it instead made him strive for more. He returned to climbing after the war, setting his sights even higher with each climb.



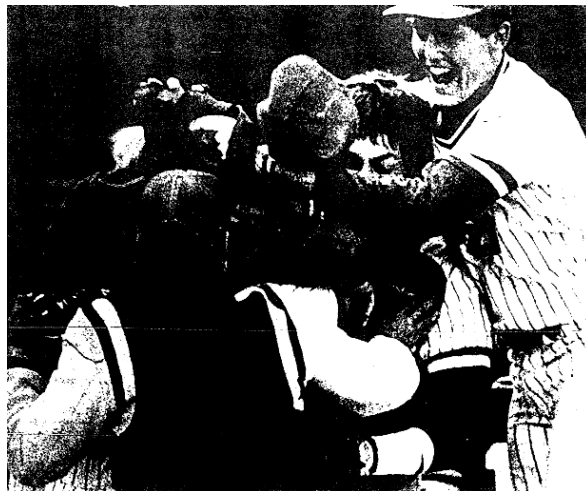
1982 Reds Legion B

The Reds had never won more than 55% of their summer Legion B games throughout each of the seasons of the 1970's, but that win percentage increased greatly into the 60% range and even low 70% range in the early 1980's. The Reds first qualified for the Legion B District Tournament in 1979, and won two games at Districts in 1980, one District game in 1981, and two more in 1982.

This postseason experience against many of the top large school teams in the Northern Front Range area gave the Reds a chance to perform under pressure, with everything on the line. Now more than 3 decades later, the Reds are now known for their ability to perform exceptionally under pressure, and that isn't something that was picked up overnight, but the confidence shown in these players to take on the top teams in the state and to make big plays and pick up clutch hits when needed started right here in the early 1980's and was passed on to the youth players that these high school heroes coached. Reds from this era coached T-ball players that would go on to win State in 1994. The victories amassed by the older players allowed these youth players to grow up knowing that they were a part of a special Program that knew how to win, and expected to win. These youths in the mid-80's had never witnessed a sub-.500 season for the Reds, and expected to see their coaches playing in the postseason, and they themselves worked hard in anticipation of their day to come in the spotlight.

First Undefeated League Record and A Close Miss at Winning It All

The Reds won their first 14 games of the 1983 season, winning the first 9 games at home, typically by large margins, and then traveled to Roosevelt and defeated them 19-0 and 16-0. The Reds were starting to dominate the league, and had one more major obstacle to overcome: defeating Valley in Districts. The Reds were 0-4 against Valley in Districts, and 3 of those games had been blowout losses. Trailing 2-0 in the top of the 2nd inning, the Reds scored 4 runs to take a lead on Valley, but then allowed the game to be tied back up in the bottom of the inning. The Reds though then drew 5 walks, including 3 straight walks on full-count pitches, and picked up two more runs to take back the lead. Then in the bottom of the 7th inning with a 1-run lead and the bases loaded with two outs, the Reds struck out the final batter on 3 pitches to win the District Championship and to finish off their first postseason win over Valley.



1983 Reds claim 1st District Title with win over Valley

The Reds then defeated Florence to win Regionals, played at Eaton, by a 1-0 score and by stranding the would-be tying run at 3rd base as the Reds recorded the final two outs. The Reds then faced Trinidad with a chance to qualify for the State Championship Game for the first time in history. The Reds got down 3-0 early, but rallied to take a 4-3 lead before allowing 4 more runs. Things looked bleak, but with two runs scored in the 5th inning versus one allowed, the Reds headed into the 6th inning down 8-6. With one out, the Reds sent 7 straight batters to the plate that each got on base safely as the Reds scored 6 runs to take a commanding lead that they would hold onto to advance to the State Championship Game.



1983 Reds celebrate State Semifinal win to advance to the Reds' 1st State Championship Game appearance

Their opponent in the 1983 State Championship Game was Valley, winners of 3 of the past 5 State Championships. The Reds took a 2-0 lead in the 1st inning, and then added to it to make it 5-0 going into the 4th inning. The Reds then allowed 4 runs as Valley hit successive groundballs just out of the reach of Reds' infielders. The Reds still had the lead though and added another run in the 6th inning to take the game into the 7th inning with a 2-run lead. The Reds then again had a series of balls hit just out of their reach and allowed 3 runs to come in to give Valley the lead, and then left two runners on base in the bottom of the 7th inning as the Reds lost 7-6. This loss was quite bitter for the Reds to accept as they had had a real opportunity to defeat Valley and win the Reds' first State Championship, but let it slip away. Valley had been a huge favorite, but the Reds had nearly scored the upset.

Resilience Leads to First Perfect Regular Season Record

Resilience though isn't learned in victory, it's learned in defeat. Sir Edmund Hillary didn't quit after failing to reach the summit in 1952, he came right back the next season and attempted it again.

The Reds also came back just a few days after the loss to start the 1983 summer season with a 10-0 league win over University and started building back for another shot at the State Championship. The Reds advanced to the Legion B District Tournament again and won a couple games there, nearly qualifying for State.

The Reds then came into the 1984 spring season on a mission, and it showed in their play as the Reds went undefeated throughout the regular season, taking a 16-0 record into the postseason following their 2nd straight undefeated league record. The postseason took a new format with a 16-team State Tournament, and the Reds faced Mapleton at home in the first round. The Reds took an early 5-0 lead and held on by getting a strikeout with the potential tying run on 3rd base and the go-ahead run on 2nd base to end the game. The Reds' crowd went wild and a number of young ballplayers saw the victory and became that much more enamored with Eaton Baseball as their heroes advanced to the Elite Eight. Many of those 7-8 year-old kids (that would go on to win State as juniors and seniors a decade later) travelled all the way down to the south end of the state to watch the Reds face Trinidad the next week. The Reds would lose that game, their perfect season, and their chance at winning State by a 13-11 score. As disappointingly as the season ended, the Reds had established themselves as a team that was one of the 8-10 teams that could be expected to compete for the State Championship each season. The Reds now expected to win, not just during the regular season, but during the postseason as well. Little could the Reds have even dreamt of it at the time, but the 17-1 record posted in 1984 would go on to start a 30-year record for the Reds that would yield the highest winning percentage in baseball throughout the entire nation.

50-Game Home Winning Streak

“Every day you may make progress. Every step may be fruitful. Yet there will stretch before you an ever-lengthening, ever-ascending, ever-improving path. You know you will never get to the end of the journey. But this, so far from discouraging, only adds to the joy and glory of the climb.” – Sir Winston Churchill

The Reds finished another strong summer in 1984 and defeated Greeley West in the District Tournament. The Reds were within two runs of a perfect regular season again in the spring of 1985, losing just a single game when the Reds' two-out rally fell short. The Reds then won the 1985 spring District Tournament with 3 lopsided wins. In the first round of Regionals, the Reds hosted Mapleton again and after trailing 3-2 going into the 5th inning, the Reds scored two runs to take the lead and held on to defeat Mapleton for the 2nd straight year. The Reds had established dominance at games played at Eaton, and were in the midst of what would become a 50-game home winning streak for the Reds from 1981 through 1986.

Reds vs. Future Major League Pitcher

But after defeating Mapleton, the 1985 Reds had to face Lamar and the top pitcher in the state, one that would go on to have a Major League Baseball career that included over 600 pitching appearances. This pitcher didn't lose in high school, but the Reds didn't care, and playing at home, the Reds scored the first run on a wild pitch and then going into the bottom of the 7th inning the Reds were in a 1-1 tie. The Reds then picked up a one-out single, and then with two outs, the Reds singled twice in a row to win the ballgame and send the Reds and their fans to celebration as the Reds returned once again to the Final Four. The Reds faced another top pitcher in the state from Rifle the following week in Greeley and scored 3 runs early, but fell 5-3 to end the season. The Reds then went on to defeat Trinidad by a large margin to take a disappointing 3rd place at State. The Reds though had put together another nearly perfect season and defeated one of the top Colorado pitchers throughout the 1980's at any classification. They were climbing even higher.



1985 Reds celebrate huge upset win over Lamar's top pitcher that would go on to appear in over 600 Major League games

Hats Flipped Backwards During Infield

The three years from 1983-1985 included a total of just 5 losses for the Reds; throughout the 1970's the Reds had never even had a single season with fewer than 5 losses. The Reds were coming into their own. The Reds still weren't the best team in the state in any year, but they had clearly moved past teams like Highland, University, and even Valley that had beaten them in the 1970's, as the Reds took over Northern Colorado baseball in their classification. The Reds could even defeat much larger teams like Greeley West and Greeley Central during the summer, with a bunch of farm kids from a town with a population under 2,000 taking on much larger schools. The Reds started carrying with them a certain swagger, the Reds even took infield with their hats turned backwards during the latter half of the 1980's and into the 1990's, telling everyone that we're coming at you, and we think we're going to beat you. The Reds would have worn

their hats backwards for infield even if playing the New York Mets back then, they had grown up to see many great victories by the Reds and they feared no one. This permeated throughout the younger players as well that were playing T-Ball in the summer of '85. These players were being taught the game of baseball by their older heroes, who served as coaches throughout the summer to these players. The Reds probably deep down knew they weren't the top team in the state just yet – clearly they didn't have truly dominant pitching like they do now – but they didn't fear any opponent.



The Reds form an identity as underdogs that simply don't know, or care, that they're supposed to lose to larger metro teams – many of these Denver teams referred to the Reds as a bunch of "hicks", a role the Reds embraced as they defeated these teams

The Old Field

The 1986 Reds again won league and reached their 50th straight win on their home field. To put that feat in perspective, it has only been matched once since this time by the Reds. The Reds' home field was by no means the top-of-the-line field they now play on. The field had an all-dirt infield, infielders would throw out the largest rocks in front of them before the game and during infield, often finding small pieces of metal or even pieces of asphalt or cinder blocks. The dirt was hard, no starting Red in the lineup wore a uniform that didn't have a large hole in the knee from sliding, and surrounding those holes were blood stains. Up until the mid 1980's, there was a light pole in dead centerfield, it was in play with no fence or warning track around it, and constituted a major hazard on every fly ball as it was planted 270 feet from home plate. The rightfield fence was nearly 800 feet away, with an unpaved running track, football goal posts, and even a sandpit all in play. Lefthanders could pull a ball that would bounce downhill onto the track and could roll at times so far that the hitter was literally in the dugout after an inside-the-park home run before the outfielder had even gotten the ball back into the infield.

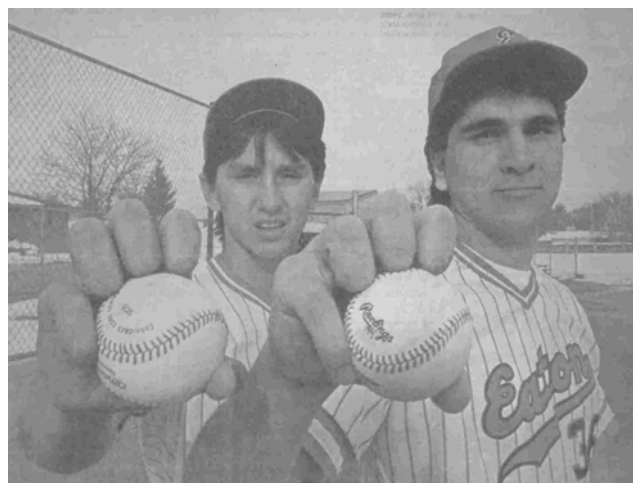


The Old Field

The Reds had the only field in the state, and likely the only one in the nation, that had three orange "foul" poles (yes, orange, not yellow, as the metal corral poles were so thin you couldn't have seen them well if painted yellow): one down the leftfield line (at 327 feet), one in rightfield (only to help mark fair balls at the 300 foot mark as there was no fence there), and one in left-centerfield that marked the spot from which if the ball went to the right of it, an outfielder had to climb over the fence (with stretches that included a few random strands of barbed wire), or crawl under it, to retrieve the live ball in the dirt alley; there were no ground-rule doubles in centerfield as dead centerfield was approximately 500 feet away with a fence that ran parallel to the 2nd-3rd baseline. The mound was high (but the field was so unlevel it would be impossible to measure its exact height), and the mound was large – the entire infield sloped outward from the massive pitching mound at its center. The batters boxes were like sand boxes, dug out and sunken in to make good hitters cringe. In the 1970's, an overthrow past 1st base could have the ball end up in a fenced area with sheep on the school's land for the Agricultural Department. Foul balls could end up in cow manure as chicken wire had to be installed above the visitor's bleachers in the 1970's to protect the cows. In one game in which the umpires wouldn't listen to the fact that the opposing Fort Lupton pitcher was throwing a spitball to dominate the Reds, Coach Danley had to take matters into his own hands and had his players load up foul balls with fresh cow manure and return the lightly stained, but strong-smelling, balls back to the field. After that, the pitcher licked his fingers for a spitball only once more that game, not twice, and the Reds came back to win the game as the pitcher lost the desire to throw another spitball. The field was nothing short of flat-out ugly, requiring coaches and umpires to spend over 5 minutes going through ground rules before each game. Nearly every baseball player walked around all summer with a huge scab on their right knee from sliding into 2nd base, many sported black eyes or cuts on their faces and arms or marks on their chest from bad hops off of rocks. The Reds' only Major League draft choice of that era was said by one newspaper to "have played on a field better suited for growing corn than playing baseball." All in all, the field was...simply beautiful. The Reds held a distinctive home field advantage – they hated their field less than their opponents did.

A Dominant Pitch Needed, and Found

The 1986 Reds were shut out at Mapleton by a score of 4-0 to the top pitcher in the state to end another strong season for the Reds. The Reds were more successful than a team should be at knocking off top pitchers, but couldn't win at State consistently without having dominant pitchers of their own. The Reds needed a way to turn farm kids into top pitchers, and since you can't really teach a kid to throw 90 mph like the naturally talented pitchers that the Reds were facing, the Reds turned to a different approach. Coach Danley saw a pitcher on TV from Oklahoma State defeat one of the top teams in the nation with only an average fastball, but a breaking pitch that was nearly unhittable, and looked like a spitball. TiVo didn't exist back then, so the only way to figure out what he was throwing was to go out and see it firsthand. Coach Danley went out to Oklahoma State and talked to the pitching coach and watched that pitcher grip it and throw it firsthand.



The emergence of the knuckle curve

The kid was throwing a knuckle curveball, a pitch that had been developed by a pitcher nearly 100 years before that had torn a tendon in his index finger as a bricklayer and needed to find another way to make a pitch break, as he couldn't throw a regular curveball without that tendon. The pitch was used sparingly, but effectively, by a handful of pitchers and became somewhat popular after the spitball was banned, even landing one pitcher in the Hall of Fame, but then somewhat disappeared as some throwers of it went to war in the 1940's. The pitch worked much like a spitter but typically required years of work to develop for a pitcher to control it effectively. Some Eaton pitchers would start to throw it, fooling batters into thinking it was just a fastball as the human eye can't distinguish between the spin coming over the top versus the opposite spin of a fastball rotating the other way, plus the pitch is thrown hard enough to initially appear to be fastball velocity. And Danley made sure the pitch was gripped by Reds' pitchers in photographs in a manner completely unlike what was actually used.

In 1951, Edmund Hillary set out on a scouting trip to find a different route up Mount Everest, as previous attempts simply were not cut out for anyone to be able to make it. He discovered a route up what would become known as the Ice Fall, but with many other countries, including the Soviets, also vying to have one of their own men become the first to climb the highest peak in the world, Edmund Hillary and his group didn't exactly go out and share this information with the entire climbing world, as they held some of the secrets of Everest close to their vest so that they themselves would be the ones to reach its peak.

Once Underdogs Often, Now Only at State

The Reds now had a history of winning. They were still the underdogs going into the postseason, but were one of the teams that had a chance, and opponents with more talent wanted to avoid ever seeing the Reds on their side of the bracket. In the summer of 1986, the Reds defeated Valley and two other teams in the Legion B District Tournament to qualify for their first American Legion State Tournament since the 1960's. The Reds won their first State Tournament game there with a stunning 7-6 win over Lakewood before falling in two losses to much larger schools that were heavy favorites. Remarkably, the Reds now have over 60 Legion A Varsity/Legion B State Tournament wins (nearly 50 of these wins coming since 2002, averaging 3.7 per year during this time), but this would be the only such victory in the 1980's for the Reds. Legion B baseball was different back then and nearly every top team in the state had their high school team in the league, thus making it incredible for the small community of Eaton to even put a team within reach of qualifying for it, let alone actually making it to the Legion State Tournament. The Reds would be back to the Legion B State Tournament again in 1988 and then again in 1993, with then many appearances and victories during the Championship Years that followed after the spring 1994 State Championship. No player from the 1994 team though wanted to win the first State Championship in history back when they were kids in the 1980's, as they dreamt of winning maybe the 5th State Title by the time they set foot on the field, wanting to see their heroes accomplish this feat first.



Reds defeat Sheridan 2-0 in 1987 State Tournament game played at Eaton

Surpassing Valley

The 1987 team won the League Championship again, and defeated Valley in a non-league game; the Reds had climbed above this once-mighty foe, and between spring and summer games, had suffered only two defeats in the past 13 games against Valley following this win. The Reds stormed through the District Tournament not allowing a run in the first two games and then winning the District Championship over Brush 7-4. The Reds then faced Sheridan the next week, with a chance to avenge the loss suffered at Sheridan the previous year which had ended the Reds' season. This time, the game was played at Eaton, but the Reds would have to face likely the top pitcher in the state again. The Reds though threw a shutout at Sheridan, behind the new knuckle curve that had not been seen before by their opponent. The Reds managed only 5 hits offensively, but one of them knocked in two runs in the 4th inning to give the Reds the win.

The following week though, the Reds lost at Rocky Ford amidst some of the most appalling home-town umpiring the Reds would ever face; CHSAA then determined it would no longer have Regional games played at team's home sites to avoid this problem and would instead have neutral tournament sites that would host four-team Regional tournaments. The summer of 1987 saw the Reds post their best Legion B record yet, winning over 80% of their games with a 25-6 mark, which was a vast improvement over prior years' typical win percentage of around 65%. The season ended in Districts, but was the start of a stretch where the Reds started consistently winning 70-80% of their summer games.

The Wildest Game During the Wild Days of the Underdog Years

The 1988 team won the Reds' 10th consecutive League Championship, finishing with an undefeated league record for the 3rd time in Reds' history. Only a doubleheader against Brush had scores that were even close, as the Reds bombed all of their other league opponents. The Reds then faced Highland in a must-win game to advance in the District Tournament and qualify for the State Tournament. As expected, the Reds took a big lead over Highland of 14-1 after two innings. The score was still lopsided at 17-6 going into the top of the 5th inning, and the Reds just needed 3 outs to secure the win via the 10-run rule. As the wind picked up speed and things turned eerie, three outs weren't reached until after 16 Highland runs had scored and two Reds' pitching changes had occurred. This was clearly the worst inning in Eaton history on its home field, and by most measures the worst inning ever on any field the Reds have ever played. The Reds re-entered all of their starters on offense after having let substitutes hit in the 4th inning, and came back to score 3 runs in the bottom of the 5th inning to narrow the deficit to 22-20. The Reds then allowed just one base runner and no runs in the 6th and 7th innings, but after failing to score in the 6th inning, the Reds were still down by 2 runs with 3 outs left in their season. The Reds led off with a single, a walk, and another single, and then after a groundout, drew two more walks and then a single to win the game 23-22 and advance in Districts. The Reds then defeated University but after having wasted much of their top pitching in the comeback against Highland, fell to Brush in the District Championship. The Reds had qualified for State already though, and played at Sheridan, but were shut out by one of the top pitchers in the state.



1988 Reds

Return to the Legion B State Tournament

That summer though, the Reds put together their best season yet for Legion B, taking a 28-2 record into the postseason. The Reds defeated host Commerce City in the first round of Districts, but then after losing to Fort Collins, had to battle back to beat Louisville and Loveland to qualify for the State Tournament, thereby making this the first 30-win season in Reds' history. In only their 2nd Legion B State Tournament appearance in over 20 years, the Reds had an early lead against Overland before losing the game in the bottom of the 7th inning on a home run. The Reds then fell the next day to Fort Collins in another close game to end the season.

The Game-Tying Call That Vanished

The Reds started the 1989 season with a 10-game win streak, and then after splitting with Brush, went on to win out to secure the League Championship and then defeated Brush again for the District Championship. The Reds then won Regionals at Butch Butler by taking an early 2-0 lead against Denver Christian and held on for the win, and then defeated Highlands Ranch with a dominant pitching performance as the Reds won 7-1. This set the Reds up against perennial State contender Lamar in the Final Four. After giving up a run in the top of the 1st inning, the Reds came back in the bottom half of the inning to score twice and take the lead. Then in the 3rd inning the Reds gave up two runs to fall behind 3-2. In the 5th inning, the Reds walked and bunted the runner to 3rd base after he'd taken 2nd base on a wild pitch, but he was then thrown out at the plate attempting to score on a wild pitch. Then with the Reds still down 3-2 in the bottom of the 7th inning, the Reds led off with a single, then a sacrifice bunt moved the runner to 2nd base and a groundout put the runner on 3rd base with two outs.

It was then that the pitcher faked a pickoff to third base on a trick play designed to fool the runner into thinking an overthrow had been made on a pickoff attempt to 3rd base, when actually the pitcher still had the ball and the pitcher would run over to tag the runner as he tried to score. However during this play, the pitcher balked by stepping directly toward home plate while faking the throw to 3rd base. Then the third baseman illegally faked a tag with the runner diving back into 3rd base. Then the third baseman illegally obstructed the runner by intentionally diving into him before the pitcher later tagged him out. During all of this, the nearest field umpire to the play had raised his arms to call the balk (and likely the obvious fake tag and interference) that would have tied up the game. However after the tag from the pitcher was applied, the umpire inexplicably lowered his arms and ran off the field as the Reds attempted to argue the call before the umpires left the field. A play is always dead once an umpire puts both arms up, yet somehow the umpires let this illegal play continue. The arguments went on well after the game as every knowledgeable fan in attendance knew the Reds had been cheated out of the game, as the Reds' runner was advancing home with the umpires' arms clearly raised for the balk to tie the game. Even the Lamar coaches were down in rightfield with their players trying to show them how to do the play correctly while the arguments with CHSAA officials continued. In the end though, Lamar was declared the winner and would go on to win the State Championship easily against La Junta. While by no means making up for this defeat, it seemed only fitting that in the 2008 State Championship Game against Lamar, the Reds' shortstop verbally deked (legally, without interfering or applying a fake tag) the would-be tying run on 2nd base (with no outs yet in the inning) and got him in a rundown with a tag applied by a teammate to end the threat as the Reds went on to win that game to give the Reds the 2008 State Championship.



1989 Reds

As difficult as it was to lose this game in 1989, let alone to lose on a terrible call (the Reds' player that was called out later received a written apology from the head of CHSAA, after reviewing videotape of the play, for the poor umpiring that cost the Reds; that umpire never worked another Reds' game), the fact that a team with the great tradition of Lamar would actually have practiced all week for a play like this (they put the play on by saying "little raton", in Spanish "raton" means "rat") to have to beat the Reds showed one thing: the Reds had arrived as one of a handful of dominant teams that now had others having to use trickery (and absurd umpiring) to defeat them. The Reds had entered the 1980's with only two League Championships and just one Regional Championship. But the Reds ended the decade with League Championships in all 10 seasons, and with four more Regional Championships. In summer American Legion games, the Reds qualified for Districts in each year of the 1980's, something that they had done only once before, in 1979, was now something they were doing every year. The Reds' teams battled hard and didn't catch any breaks at the State Tournament, as balls would be softly hit just in between their fielders in big games while the Reds would hit hard line drives right at fielders at key times. And then there was the umpiring debacle in 1989 that ended the Reds' season just short of a potential State Championship. The Reds had accomplished many things throughout the 1980's on the field, and less noticeably at the time, had made a huge impact on the future of the Reds' Program by showing the Reds' younger players how to play the game, how to compete hard, and how to want it even more with each year that passed with a loss ending the season.

End of a Great Decade

The Reds completed another solid Legion B season in 1989 that had the Reds compete in the Legion B District Tournament for the 11th consecutive year. That ran the 1980's Reds to a perfect record of winning League every single spring, and qualifying for Districts every single summer. That was a remarkable feat, given where the Reds started.

The 1980's Reds were a bunch of tough guys. If you had an injury, you'd better be in a cast or be a pitcher, otherwise, you were playing, and were expected to play hard, and play well. That rule, self-imposed by the players themselves, never needed to be stated or written though, as it simply was the way things were. Everyone played with scabs on their knees and elbows from sliding on a surface not unlike concrete. If you were bleeding, you rubbed a little dirt in it and you'd be fine. If it was still bleeding steadily, you added some pine tar to the dirt to scab it up. The players were big. They were strong. They were tough as nails. The smallest guy on the team was still a giant in stature, especially to the younger Reds' players that looked up to them as heroes. They wore short sleeves when it was freezing outside. They liked games in bad weather, and never lost a meaningful game in extra innings. When the game boiled down more to guts than to talent, the Reds always won. There were Major League scouts at their games, but it wasn't to watch them, it was to scout their opponents. They didn't care, and used it as even further motivation to go beat the guy. They took care of business and turned Eaton into the clearly dominant team in its classification in Northern Colorado. They were afraid of nothing and of no one, defeating teams in the State Tournament with far better pitching and far more natural talent offensively. They wore their hats backwards during infield. They dove for balls that they had little chance of catching. They gave it their all, and they wanted it as much as any Reds' team ever has. They started the decade as a nuisance to opponents but as a huge underdog. They ended the decade as clearly one of the top teams in the state that no opponent wanted to see on their side of the tournament bracket. These players went on to great success in coaching, in business, in the military, and in life – and those successes surprised no one. These guys were winners.



One Step Backwards to Start the 1990's

The 1990 Reds took a 15-1 record into the postseason and defeated Highland to qualify for the State Tournament. The Reds though dropped the first game at Regionals against Denver Christian as a 7th inning rally brought in 4 runs but still left the Reds short. That summer, the Reds lost a couple games to Brush that ended up costing the Reds a spot in the District Tournament for the first time since 1978.

The Reds' 2nd State Championship Appearance

The 1991 Reds competed in the Greeley Tournament for the first time ever, competing against large-school teams like Greeley West and Greeley Central. The Reds dropped these games, and would continue to over the next few years until the Reds won the tournament in 1994 (winning 3 games by a total of just 4 runs) and would then win it again in 1995 and then would win it so consistently over the next decade that Class 4A and Class 5A opponents dropped out of the tournament after losing too many games to Class 3A Eaton. Eventually the tournament was disbanded. But in 1991, the Reds were the heavy underdog in the invitational tournament and thus the losses to larger schools were not unexpected. The Reds then won 8 straight games before dropping a pair of games to Brush that gave a team other than Eaton the first League Championship since the 1970's. The Reds would go on to win the next 16 consecutive League Championships following that year, but in 1991 the Reds had to enter Districts as the #2 seed. The Reds had to score a run in the 6th inning to tie up Burlington and then two runs in the 9th inning to defeat them in order to advance to the District Championship and to qualify for the State Tournament. The Reds though lost to Brush for the District Title. The Reds then came back late to defeat Hotchkiss and then blew out Roosevelt by taking a 17-0 lead by the 4th inning to win via the 10-run rule and earn the Reds' 6th Regional Championship.



1991 Reds prepare for State Semifinal game against Manitou Springs, the Reds would go on to win

The Reds then caught their first break in the Final Four, as the opposing ace pitcher from Manitou Springs was arrested before the game for missing a court date and while he was allowed to pitch after some of his team's parents bailed him out of jail, he didn't get completely warmed up and the Reds scored twice in the 1st inning off of 4 walks and a hit. Two more Reds walked and scored in the 2nd inning. Then after falling behind 5-4, the Reds led off the 6th inning with a single, and then after a groundout, got a walk, then a triple to take the lead, and then added an insurance run off of a throwing error, and then in the 7th inning threw out a runner at the plate from leftfield to end the game and send the Reds to the State Championship Game to face Brush for the 4th time of the season. The Reds tied it up 1-1 in the bottom of the 1st inning and kept it tied through 3 innings, but then in the 4th inning, Brush led off with 4 straight hits and then after the Reds recorded two outs, Brush rattled off 6 straight hits to take a commanding lead that they then put away in the 6th inning with 6 more runs to finish the season 4-0 against the Reds. In truth, Brush was simply the better team with two dominant pitchers and an explosive offense, but the Reds didn't care about that and wanted to pick off a great upset to bring home the Title. That didn't happen though in the Reds' 2nd State Championship Game appearance. Little could it be seen at the time – Brush had just beaten the Reds 4 times in a season – but following this defeat, the Reds would go on to rattle off 45 consecutive wins over Brush.

The Year the Reds Didn't Win Regionals

The Reds fought back from the 1991 State Championship loss to put together another strong summer that included an undefeated league record, the first in Reds' Legion B history, and had the Reds back in the Legion B District Tournament after a one-year hiatus. The Reds started the spring 1992 season with four losses primarily due to the Greeley Tournament, but then rebounded to win the League Championship, and started a new streak of consecutive League Championships that would go on through the 2007 season. The Reds defeated Yuma by scoring 6 runs in the 8th inning, and by adding 3 late insurance runs to secure the win over Burlington to win the District Tournament as well. The Reds then faced Colorado Springs Christian in the State Tournament. The Reds were heavily favored on paper, but fell behind 4-2 after 3 innings before the Reds stormed back for 4 runs in the 4th inning to take a 2-run lead. Then Colorado Springs Christian had things go their way with 3 consecutive infield hits that were grounded too weakly for the Reds to charge and have time to make an out, then a double put the Reds behind by a run. The Reds managed a hit in the 6th inning, but then the next 6 batters failed to reach base to end the game and the Reds' season. At the time it couldn't be seen, but this would go on to become known to the Reds as the year they didn't win Regionals, as the Reds had won it in '91 and have won it every year since.

The All-Day/All-Night Final Four

The Reds had failed to get back to the State Championship Game in 1992, and had come within a game of qualifying for the Legion B State Tournament but lost in Districts. But after a 3-loss start in the Greeley Tournament in 1993, the Reds rattled off victory after victory to go undefeated in league and take a 14-3 record into the postseason after defeating Denver Christian by scoring 6 runs late to keep the win streak alive. The Reds then won Districts with decisive wins over Brush and Platte Valley. The Reds then defeated Burlington 21-2 and put away Denver Christian early to win Regionals.

The Reds then faced Gunnison in the Final Four, and took an early 5-0 lead after 2 innings, when a huge rainstorm hit and caused the game to be delayed for hours. The Reds helped the grounds crew to get the field ready once the rain let up, as they were closing in on another State Championship Game appearance and didn't want to let momentum change overnight, and didn't want to let their ace pitcher's arm swell up overnight either. The Reds and the rest of the grounds crew got the field ready, but it was Gunnison that then caught the momentum and slowly erased the Reds' lead and then tied up the game with a run in the 7th inning. The Reds had to strike out the final two batters to strand the potential game-winning run for Gunnison at 3rd base in the 7th inning to send the game into extra innings. The Reds failed to score in the 8th, 9th, and 10th innings while one of the gutsiest pitching performances in Reds' history was turned in by the Reds' starter that faced the minimum number of batters in extra innings and struck out 7 of the game's final 8 batters in an 11-inning complete game win as the Reds knocked in a run in the top of the 11th inning.



After helping to get the field ready, the Reds score the go-ahead run in the 11th inning to advance to the State Championship Game

The State Semifinal game ended so late in the night that it was considered most likely that the game would be played the following day after other State Championship Games for the larger classifications, but when it was determined the game would have to be played before all the other games and thus very early in the morning, the game was decided to be played as soon as possible that evening instead. The Reds were in a 0-0 game in the 3rd inning when a couple of costly errors, walks, and hits allowed resulted in a 10-run inning for Kent Denver to take a commanding lead. The Reds fought back by holding Kent Denver to no runs the rest of the way, and the Reds scored a run in the bottom of the 3rd inning and then scored two more runs in the 6th inning and two more runs in the 7th inning, but left the bases loaded and lost 10-5 as the game ended at 1:00am, ending the Reds' shot at winning it all and ending a 19-game win streak.

3rd Legion B State Tournament Appearance

The Reds rebounded from the tough loss to put together a 24-4 summer record going into the 1993 Legion B District Tournament. With wins over Greeley West, Greeley Central and Boulder, the Reds qualified for the State Tournament. They also showed the Greeley teams that they could beat them, and would go on to do so again the following spring in the Greeley Tournament. Being able to beat the large school teams consistently didn't happen for many more years, but a few upsets over these teams in the mid 1990's, including consecutive victories over a future Major League pitcher, got the Reds started on establishing this standard.

But the wins in this Legion B District Tournament qualified the Reds for the Legion B State Tournament for the first time since 1988 and only the 3rd time in Reds' history. The Reds had only one win throughout their previous two appearances, but won the first game of the 1993 State Tournament with a 13-3 win over Rangeview. Then after a close loss, the Reds came back to defeat Boulder to pick up their second win of the tournament before Gateway ended the Reds' season. The Reds hadn't before advanced this far in the State Tournament, and advancing through State would start to become the norm for the Reds as they took the field the following spring.



The 1993 Reds' Legion B Team after Greeley Tournament Championship, the Reds would advance to the Legion B State Tournament

Slaying The Dragon

The Reds were close to winning this thing, and they knew it. The Reds came back from the 1992 loss by designing new baseball hats. They did the same again after the 1993 loss. It wasn't just superstition, it was a way of showing all season long that this year was going to end differently than the previous year had ended. Much like planting one's flag atop a hill of a conquered land, the Reds would be the team that planted their cap atop a State Championship pileup. And yes, just in case the reason the Baseball Gods seemed to rarely cut the Reds a break at State was because of their dislike of the Reds' previous hats, then the Reds would eliminate that risk as well. Whatever it took.

The 1994 Reds' team went on and caught a couple breaks and won the State Championship that had eluded them for all these years as the Reds built up a program from almost nothing to something that was now challenging for the top spot

routinely, and that got the job done in 1994. And then again in 1995. And remarkably won the Legion B State Championship in 1997. And then put together a perfect season in 1998. And then outlasted a future 3rd round MLB draft pick in the longest Championship Game in Colorado history. And then 10-runned a team that was heavily favored over the Reds for the Title. And then completed the first perfect year in Eaton history by adding a Legion State Championship to a spring State Championship. And then scored 17 runs to defeat La Junta for the Title. And then added another Legion B Title. And then beat La Junta again for another Title. And then won the 6th consecutive spring/summer State Championship. And then won another Title in 2008 without ever trailing in the 7-game postseason. And then went 43-2 en route to winning the Legion B Championship on the Reds' home field. And then went undefeated, 10-running nearly every team faced, including a 13-0 win in the State Championship Game in 2009. And then made a great comeback to win another Legion B State Championship in 2010. And then posted another perfect year in 2012 with state titles in the spring and summer. And then moved up to Legion A in 2013 and went undefeated at 42-0, claiming the Legion A Varsity State Title with the Reds' first undefeated summer season. And then repeated as Legion A Varsity State Champions in 2014. And then won the 2015 State Championship for the Reds' 20th spring/summer title. And were honored as the 2015 National Champions by CBS Sports' MaxPreps amongst schools with an enrollment under 1,000, and ranked #17 amongst all schools. And that won the 2015 Legion A Varsity State Title. And that stand atop the nation with the highest winning % in baseball over the past 25 years, and the most state titles of any public school since '94.



Standing Atop The Mountain

There is no question that dealing with the problems faced when standing atop the mountain are far better than those of the underdogs trying to sling rocks at Goliath, and no one at Eaton Baseball would trade places with where the Reds are today with where they were in the past. However, it was a fun time and a heck of a wild ride during those days as underdogs, pulling out wild upsets over heavily-favored teams that had pitchers that would go on to play professionally. The Reds of the past instilled in players from the Championship Years a number of great qualities, including the expectation of victory against any and all odds, the dedication and work ethic needed to actually have these odds turn in your favor, the importance of every game, every inning, every play, every at-bat, every pitch, and the fortitude to pick yourself back up from a defeat and work that much harder to find victory the next time, and to give back to the Program so that others might achieve even more than you did yourself. The Reds have found great success, and owe it to the players of the past that laid the foundation and the path to allow the Reds to have reached the summit of success.

The final hundred steps to the top of Mount Everest are actually among the easiest along the journey – they are steps that most men could take without difficulty if they were to start at that spot on the mountain. There are few obstructions as the peak becomes open and passable via multiple paths as the mountain crests. Thus climbing Mount Everest, the highest peak on Earth, has little to do with the difficulty of the final few steps, but much more to do with the preparation and persistence required to reach that point at which the path becomes easier.

It is with this in mind, that members of the 1994 State Championship team in postgame interviews were quoted as saying things like, “this is for all of our heroes that wore the pinstripes before us, they’re the reason we got here” and “I’d give anything to have had this experience shared by our guys in the ‘80s, but they are all sharing in this now”. And they were – the stands were filled with players from previous years. One of the newspaper headlines aptly read “Eaton Wins It as a Family Unit”. A few years later after another State Championship, the Tournament MVP was quoted on the front page of the newspaper saying, “This isn’t just for me, it’s for the whole team and the whole community. Eaton Baseball is just one big family.”

The older members of this great family did the hard work to effectively set up base camp for the Reds high along the path to the top of the mountain, making the annual attempt at reaching the summit much less daunting of a challenge. And while anything short of a State Championship is now an utter disappointment, that’s only because of the tradition and commitment to winning that was built up through the Underdog Years, where the Reds went from near the bottom of the league standings all the way up to being consistent League Champions, and then up to being consistent Regional Champions to give themselves a shot at winning it all. Their work in climbing the mountain culminated in a State Championship in 1994 that was a reflection upon everyone that had ever worn the pinstripes, and can still be seen today as Reds are coached by players that were coached by players from these earlier periods in a tradition that now has the Reds as the winningest baseball program in the country.