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Same goals, no matter the record

Youthful Orchard Lake St. Mary's baseball keeps focus on postseason

By Mike Moore
C & G Sports Writer

ORCHARD LAKE — In the spring of 2007, the Orchard Lake St. Mary's baseball team took the field in the Division 2 state final.

That final game, a 7-4 loss to Mount Pleasant, signaled the end to what was a pretty special run, one that officially put a storied baseball program back on the map.

Since that loss in Battle Creek, coach Nick Di Ponio admits he's been rebuilding in an effort to return the program to that status, a level where competing for a state title is an expectation not the exception.

The building began a year ago, when Di Ponio took a team comprising mostly underclassmen to a respectable 14-17-1 record. Nine players returned when the 2009 season began, and the team's objectives have not changed.

"We're building to get to the point where we can be competitive with everyone we play," Di Ponio said. "It started last year with a team of mostly freshmen and sophomores. Now, while we're still very young, we have some experience to fall back on."

Fifteen games into the season, the Eaglets have played like a team still searching for consistency. Some explosive wins with double-digit runs have been followed by losses where home plate was touched only once or twice.

"We're working hard, but we still have a lot of youth and a lot of guys learning on the job," junior center fielder Korey Hall said during a recent practice, when his team was posting a 2-5 record. "We know we're getting better; it's just going to take some time."

The Eaglets were 6-9 overall, 2-6 in the Catholic League as of April 26. The team's tough league schedule can be considered either another obstacle or a springboard to St. Mary's growth.

By playing in the Catholic League, St. Mary's will consistently see some of the best teams the state has to offer. Two of last season's state champions — Birmingham Brother Rice in D-1 and Dearborn Divine Child in D-2 — call the Catholic League home during the regular season.



Photo by Tracy Dreslinski
Orchard Lake St. Mary's junior pitcher Theo Piccirilli, pictured, said he doesn't mind playing a tough schedule, as he thinks it gets the team ready for the postseason.

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“It’s never easy to play teams of that caliber, but I’ve always believed it helps with the growth and maturation process of a young team,” Di Ponio said, adding that he feels his team plays one of the hardest schedules in the state. “Sure (Catholic League) teams beat each other up most of the season, but come playoffs, you’re essentially prepared for anything.”

“It’s fun playing the schedule we do,” said junior pitcher and infielder Theo Piccirilli. “I’m not sure what good it would do us to beat up on weaker teams all season. We may not win as many as we’d like, but it helps come playoff time when we know we’ve battled the best.”

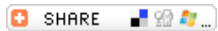
And being prepared at playoff time is objective the Eaglets have from year to year — no matter the record, no matter the youth or the experience of the team.

“Our two goals every season is to make it to Comerica (for the Catholic League finals) and make it to Battle Creek (final four),” Di Ponio said matter-of-factly. “It’s never easy, and it won’t be this year, but that’s what we focus on.”

When asked if this team was capable of accomplishing what Di Ponio had laid out, a smile overtook Hall’s face.

“I’m pretty confident — we all are,” he said. “A couple of us were part of that 2007 team, and all of us have a will to win. Some people are going to count us out or say we don’t have a chance, but we’ll see. We may surprise some teams.”

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