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Photo by Scott Dreslinski
 Sterling heights Parkway Christian shortstop Tori Fite covers second base during the Division 4 regional tourney June 6 at Grosse Pointe Woods University Liggett.

Team of destiny

Parkway Christian baseball overcomes all the way to state final

By Brad D. Bates
 C & G Sports Writer

BATTLE CREEK — Sterling Heights Parkway Christian baseball coach Angelo Gust knows a thing or two about overcoming adversity.

After battling prostate cancer, which he has been clear of for five years, Gust has a unique perspective on life’s challenges.

“Cancer really threw me for a loop — after never missing a day of teaching in 42 years and 36 years of coaching,” Gust said. “I told myself to enjoy every last thing you do.”

So when he started the first month of the 2009 season with only eight players on his roster, there may have been no better coach to help shape that group into a 2009 Division 4 state runner-up.

“It’s bittersweet,” Gust said of the Eagles’ 3-1 loss in the state final to Beal City High June 13 in Battle Creek. “I feel heartsick for our kids. This is a great ending, though. We squeezed every ounce of sweat, tears and blood out of this team.”

Because Gust was missing a chunk of his roster while the Parkway boys basketball team was in the midst of a run to the state semifinals, it put the season on an odd path, even for a coach of Gust’s tenure.

“It was a magical and mystical ride,” Gust said of the season, which ended with his first appearance in a state final despite it being his fifth trip to Battle Creek.

“We had three players for the first three weeks, and then we had eight players for the next four. Going into May 2, we had only played five games. Then we got on a run. What a wonderful year.”

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The Eagles wrapped up their season 21-5 and earned the program's first district and regional titles, as well their first quarterfinal and semifinal victories. In the state semifinal victory, a thrilling 2-1 win over Climax-Scott in 10 innings, senior Matt Mallino pitched a complete game and scored the winning run.

Parkway ran into the first roadblock it couldn't overcome in Beal City senior right-handed pitcher Tyler McDonald, who allowed three hits and struck out 11 in the final.

"I lined out every time," said Mallino, who played second base in the final. "Their pitcher did a great job today, though. He got the job done."

Beal City (34-8) took an early 2-0 lead in the top of the first, but Parkway answered right back with a run of its own when senior pitcher Mitch Michalski plated third baseman Aaron Mick.

The Aggies added another run in the top of the fifth, and with McDonald holding the Eagles to only four runners past first base, that was more than they needed.

The Eagles' pitchers were almost as dominant as McDonald throughout their playoff run, holding opponents to an average of just over one run per game on their way to the final, where Michalski pitched a complete game, allowing three runs on seven hits while striking out six.

"Eight runs is not half bad," Gust said of the total number of runs his squad gave up in the postseason. "You would think that would get you a little ways, and it did."

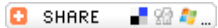
The baseball team's state-final appearance was the exclamation point on a banner year for Parkway athletics.

"No one expected us to get this far," Mallino said. "It was great to get here, and we fought."

"We set the bar as a senior class. The basketball team got to a final four, and baseball was in the finals. No one expected us to be here."

For more on the final game, go to our Web site at www.candgnews.com and click on the Sports link.

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