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'Last chance for a lot of us'

St. Mary's baseball refocuses and reloads for what could be a great 2010 season

By Mike Moore
 C & G Sports Writer

ORCHARD LAKE — Orchard Lake St. Mary's senior Theo Piccirilli has had the rare honor of playing in two state finals during his first three years of high school baseball.

He's also been forced to deal with the heartbreak associated with reaching the pinnacle of the season twice, only to walk away empty handed on each occasion.

Now the infielder is eyeing a third trip to Battle Creek, and one that includes a little hardware for the ride home.

"This is the last chance for a lot of us," Piccirilli said. "Everyone seems focused and ready to attack this season. We're all aiming at the specific goal of a state title."

Based on their experiences from last year, the Eaglets are working on some more immediate goals first.

"Sometimes you can learn more about yourself as an individual and as a team from losing," coach Nick Di Ponio said.

"We're trying not to look at the past or what's happened over the past few seasons. But at the same time, anytime you can be in the situations we have been in, it helps the growth and maturity of your team."

"Our focus right now isn't just on Battle Creek or a state title," Di Ponio added. "We want to have a successful regular season. We want to get back to Comerica (Park) for the Catholic League title, and when the playoffs finally get here, we'll worry about it then."

St. Mary's reached the Division 2 state final last spring, falling to East Grand Rapids 6-0. The Eaglets lost the final in 2007 to Mount Pleasant High 7-4.

Last year's run to the final was a bit surprising after St. Mary's finished the regular season with a 10-19 overall record and 5-15 mark in the Catholic League.

"We had a great playoff run, but we still finished with a losing record," Di Ponio said. "More or less, there's a lot to improve on this time around."

The Eaglets will have a lot of the same guys attempting that improvement. There are 12 back from the 2009 squad, including seven starters and most of the pitching rotation.



File photo by Tracy Dreslinski
 Senior Theo Piccirilli, pictured last year, and the St. Mary's baseball team reached a 2009 state final after finishing the regular season 10-19. The Eaglets are in search of their third trip to the finals in four years.

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"We know the regular season can't be like it was last year," Piccirilli said. "We're going to fix that first. But with most of our lineup back, our offense is going to be very strong. There's a lot of confidence with this team right now."

"We've got a lot of three- and four-year varsity players back, guys that know the system and know what's expected," Di Ponio said. "But that doesn't guarantee us anything."

"It's pretty simple what it comes down to here. If we throw strikes, make routine plays and hit the ball, we're going to be a good team. And if we do that, our goal won't just be getting to Battle Creek, but winning it all."

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