

Archbishop McCarthy Claims National Crown

Mavericks finish atop Baseball America poll

By Nathan Rode-*Baseball America*
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Ranking the top high school teams in the country is an inexact science, but a key factor to look for is big wins—beating a team's ace, winning a tournament or state title or defeating another national-caliber program. Archbishop McCarthy High in Southwest Ranches, Fla. pulled a few of those tasks off in dramatic fashion, beating nationally ranked Jesuit High of Tampa in the 4-A state championship game. On the mound for Jesuit was the Tigers' ace and a top-pitching prospect for the 2012 draft, righthander Lance McCullers Jr.

Already coming off a 2010 state title with several returning players, the Mavericks rolled to 29-3 record in 2011 and polished their resume with the win over Jesuit to finish the season ranked No. 1, making them Baseball America's High School Team of the Year.

"It was an incredible journey," head coach Rich Bielski said. "That's something we preached to the kids all year long: Enjoy the journey. We knew we were going to have a very strong team coming back. We knew last year that this year was going to be a very powerful year as well. The experience we had last year helped us this year."

Turning Point

The Mavericks had a sound pitching staff with a team ERA of 2.08, but crushed opponents on offense, outscoring them by double digits in 15 games. Two of the three losses were by a total of four runs, but a 5-0 loss to Miami's Columbus High on March 14 was the most shocking. Lefthander Luis Collazo, a junior, hurled a no-hitter against the Mavericks. They were expecting to face the Explorers' ace, lefthander Andrew Suarez, a ninth-round pick of the Blue Jays and Miami signee. When they learned he wasn't starting, Bielski says his team got overconfident and Collazo took advantage. That only fueled the fire, however, as the Mavericks bounced back, winning the next nine games.

"That was a changing point in our season, no doubt about it," Bielski said. "The next few games, we scored like 15 runs a game. It angered the players that it was even possible with our lineup and as many good hitters as we had. It was unconscionable. It was a slap in the face, a wakeup call that we couldn't just walk out there because we were Archbishop McCarthy and won the state championship the year before we're going to win games. We had to stay focused, no matter who was pitching."

The Mavericks would lose just one more game in their last 20 on their way to the championship. They were led by senior infielders Alexander Fernandez and Jose Brizuela and junior lefthander Andre Martinez. Fernandez and Brizuela were both drafted in the 46th round by the Tigers and Reds, respectively. Fernandez, the son of former major leaguer Alex Fernandez, was a two-way threat, hitting .470 with four home runs and 13 stolen bases. On the mound, he went 10-0, 2.39 in 56 innings with 51 strikeouts and 24 walks. Brizuela hit .477 with seven home runs and got some relief work in, earning five saves in 18 innings over 12 appearances. He struck out 37 and walked eight while stepping in as a team leader. Martinez went 12-2, 1.50 with 96 strikeouts in 54 innings.

Nick Castellanos, supplement first-round pick by the Tigers and recipient of a \$3.45 million bonus, led the 2010 squad. His talent's graduation would be a big loss for any team, but Brizuela says they are best friends and he received some very useful advice in the off-season.

"When he came back in November we trained together," Brizuela said. "I told him it would be different without him. He told me this, 'Keep your composure. You know you can do it. Keep the guys intact. Don't let them get too riled up. And just have fun.' Honestly, I learned a lot from him. I had to fill big shoes. I tried my best to be as good as him and follow his footsteps. Not only as a leader, but also as a player and a brother to my teammates. He's a great friend and he's taught me a lot."

Previously a self-titled jokester, Brizuela switched things up this spring and showed maturity. He told his teammates all season that he would lead them to The Port—referring to the state championship being played in Port St. Lucie at the Mets' spring training complex.

"I knew it was going to be a great season," Brizuela added. "I knew I had to step up as a leader. I was always confident in my team no matter if we were losing. I knew we were always in the game and be there to come back and win. It was an honor to play with those guys. They're special guys. They're like my brothers."

On Bielski's coaching staff is Alex Fernandez, owner of a major league no-hitter and a World Series champion with the 1997 Marlins. Coach Alex, as Bielski calls him, was in charge of putting the schedule together for the season. He put together a challenging one in 2010, but increased the difficulty for 2011. A flashy record was the last thing on the coaches' minds. They wanted a schedule that would prepare them for playoffs. It worked out in two ways. The Mavericks finished with a stellar record that prepared them for the playoffs and strengthened their resume for a national championship.

"This is the kind of schedule we're not going to have a pretty record," Bielski said. You can't. It's tough. Every week you're facing somebody tough. Coach Alex and I have been on the same page. It's never been about our record. It's been about being prepared come playoff time."

Special Experience

Coach Alex has had the unique opportunity to experience a championship as a professional player and now a coach. To add to it, his son was a key factor to the team's success and the deciding one in the championship against Jesuit and McCullers.

In the third inning with McCullers sitting in the mid-90s and two runners on base, the young Fernandez sat on a fastball and smoked it to left field for a three-run home run. He also started the game, pitching three innings and allowing one run on four hits. Even a walk-off in a World Series couldn't outrank that experience for the elder Fernandez.

"That is like a storybook ending," he said. "He had a great high school season. He came into his own. To be able to be on the mound and pitch in that game and hit the three-run homer was pretty impressive. I'm especially happy for him. You go through a lot growing up as the son of a major league baseball player and there's a lot of added pressure, which is really not fair. To come this way and put an exclamation point on his high school career was really impressive."

Bielski described the moment as dreamlike, saying everything went into slow motion and fell silent for him. He snapped back to reality as the ball cleared the wall.

"I felt like that was the shot heard around the world," Bielski said. "That home run would become legendary as far as the history of our program and with the school. I'm sure he's going to get congratulated on that home run for the rest of his life. That's a lifetime memory."

Archbishop McCarthy had experience on its side, also defeating Jesuit in the 2010 finals with lefthander Daniel Gibson, now at Florida, going for the Tigers and McCullers in relief. The only difference is they're now on top of the nation.

"It was on our focus from day one to try and repeat," Bielski said. "We thought we had a good opportunity to repeat. That was our focus all year. It was always out there, always ahead of us. We felt that if we could get hot and play good baseball at the right time that we would have a shot. We knew it would be a daunting task, going back-to-back because you're not sneaking up on anybody, you have a big target on your back and you're seeing everybody's ace. But that would only make us better throughout the season."