

Falcons Fly High

Florida's Flanagan High finishes season at No. 1

By **Nathan Rode**-*Baseball America*

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When Flanagan High players rushed the center of the diamond to dog pile in late May, the jubilation was for winning the Florida 6-A state title—the third in six years for the Pembroke Pines school.

A few weeks later head coach Ray Evans was pacing in a restaurant parking lot while on the phone with his second baseman Collin Martindale, who was giving the play-by-play of the seventh inning of the Texas 5-A state championship. The game was being broadcast live online and Klein High (Spring, Texas) was down 5-2 with the tying run at the plate against Corpus Christi's Carroll High. As Carroll center fielder Mark Blackmar made a spectacular diving catch to end the game, Martindale delivered the news.

"Coach, Klein lost! We're national champs!" he said on the phone.

The loss dropped the Bearcats from the No. 1 national ranking and allowed Flanagan to claim the title of Baseball America Team of the Year in 2010. The Falcons couldn't dog pile, but there was plenty of excitement.

"I still can't believe it," Evans said. "It was really emotional, high intensity."

The Falcons put together an incredible season going 25-2 in Florida's largest classification. After winning the state title, they jumped to No. 4 in the country, and then watched the scoreboard. In the next poll, two teams were upset in the playoffs—Bishop Amat High of La Puente, Calif. and Rockwall-Heath High of Heath, Texas—and Flanagan climbed to No. 2. Evans and his players were well aware of the possible outcomes and kept track of the other teams' performances.

Challenging Road

But Flanagan's rise to the top wasn't completely circumstantial. Losing just

two games in a season is a tough task in any state and Flanagan's losses were to worthy opponents. The first came in February to American Heritage High (Plantation, Fla.)—the 2008 national champs and a perennial powerhouse. The 1-0 loss came in Flanagan's own tournament championship with the decisive run coming in the first inning.

"When we lost that game, I told them I think they're a special team," Evans said. "These guys were a true family. There were no groups or cliques. The umpires told us after the game they were spoiled and would never see another game like that."

The Falcons won their next 11 games before meeting national No. 1 Farragut High of Knoxville. It was another tournament championship game, this time in the Orlando National Classic. Farragut's junior tandem of lefthander Philip Pfeifer and shortstop Nicky Delmonico—both first-team all-Americans and early-round prospects for 2011—fueled the Admirals' 2-0 win. Pfeifer struck out 16 and allowed just four hits in a complete game shutout while Delmonico hit a two-run double in the third inning.

"He's one of the best pitchers I've seen in high school," Evans said of Pfeifer. "We just didn't get the hits we needed."

While the Farragut game would be Flanagan's last loss, it wouldn't be the last speed bump. Senior righthander Justin Machado, the team's No. 1 starter, was taking longer to recover from starts and in the seventh inning of a 1-0 game against Douglas High (Parkland, Fla.) something wasn't quite right. Evans pulled Machado from the game and called on senior outfielder/righthander Juan "Pichi" Torres to close it out. He shut the door, but found himself thrust into the ace's role, as Machado would be shut down with arm trouble after the game.

"We had some guys step up and do really well for us," Evans said. "You've gotta have a horse and that ended up being Pichi."

Pitching Pichi

Torres twirled several gems as the Falcons marched through the playoffs. In the region semifinal, Flanagan met with West Broward High—another

Pembroke Pines school. Torres said that was his toughest outing during the title run. He gave up seven runs (five earned) on eight hits while striking out four. Down 7-5 in the bottom of the seventh, Martindale reached on a hit by pitch and junior shortstop Ricky Santiago collected his second hit of the game. That brought Torres to the plate as the winning run. He wasted no time in lifting his team to victory again as he deposited the first pitch over the center-field fence for a walk-off home run.

"It was amazing," Torres said. "I've never hit (a walk-off) before. I couldn't wait to get to home plate."

Torres continued to dominate on the mound the following week and pitched Flanagan into the state final four. Against Coral Springs (Fla.) High he pitched with efficiency, throwing just 82 pitches over nine innings, allowing one run on seven hits. The Falcons tied the game 1-1 in the top of the seventh before a scoreless eighth and plated the winning run in the ninth.

After the Coral Springs win, things actually got easier for the Falcons and there were no more stressful victories. They exploded for 14 hits in the semifinal against Orlando's Timber Creek High and advanced to the state final with an 8-4 win, where they met Miami's American High. Flanagan scored 10 runs in the first frame and easily held on for a 12-3 win and the state title.

Then the Falcons went into wait-and-see mode. Evans knew a state title would give them a good boost in the poll and that several teams were still playing. The same scenario played out in 2009 with a Texas team sitting atop the rankings as it headed into the state championship game. Last season, it was Moody High of Corpus Christi. The Trojans fell in the 4-A title game to Texarkana's Texas High, allowing Bishop Gorman High of Las Vegas, to celebrate for a second time after winning a fourth straight 4-A championship in Nevada.

However, Klein made it a little more nerve-racking. The Bearkats broke a 3-3 tie with a walk-off, two-out single in the bottom of the seventh against Plano (Texas) West High in the state semifinal.

But as much help was provided by teams losing late, Flanagan put itself in a

position to move up.

"Every time we had a close game, someone pulled something out their hat," Evans said. "Sure enough, we won it. I told them, 'You guys earned it. We are done and we can't do down. We can only go up. Things can happen.'"

And sure enough, things happened.

Torres finished the season 10-1, 1.96 in 75 innings with 58 strikeouts and just 12 walks. Junior first baseman Mike Melendez led the team in hitting with a .459/.515/.800 line in 85 at-bats with six home runs and 32 RBIs.

"We had a refuse to lose mentality," Evans said. "It was all about getting back to the final four for the seniors. They were phenomenal, relentless all year long. When it was all over it was like a dream."