

# MAKING MEMORIES



8402

Baseball

## Quite a ride for '86 Watsonville team

So maybe they didn't make it to the World Series. But they certainly didn't go down with all the horror of a Mookie Wilson grounder headed straight for the knocking knees of Bill Buckner.

That would be a tragi-comedy for later in the summer of 1986.

No, the Watsonville American Major All-Stars of 16 years ago weren't afforded the opportunity to be Bucknered. And for that they should probably be thankful.

They were the last county team to advance to the Western Region Little League Tournament in San Bernardino — the final treacherous step on the road to Williamsport, Pa., and the Little League World Series.

Therefore, they understand the plight of the Aptos Little Leaguers of 2002, currently pulling up their stirrups in preparation for today's opener against Laramie, Wyo., in the hot inland valley of Southern California.

For better or for worse, there are legacies to be built.

"Of course, the thing I remember the most is that we lost the first game," says James Gomez, currently the Watsonville High baseball coach and one of the stars of that '86 team. "We lost to the team that ended up going on to play on TV against Taiwan (for the Little League World Series title)."

Gomez pauses briefly, then adds with a laugh: "Heartbreak, basically. That's what you remember."

That pain might still linger just a bit for Gomez considering he was the guy who struck out 16 Arizona batters in that game, giving up just two hits, only to lose it 4-2 and be put out of the running after Day 1.

Tough luck, but not exactly Buckner-style tough. Though it put them immediately out of contention for Williamsport, Watsonville American didn't use that as an excuse to sulk through the rest of its fairy-tale run. There was still baseball left to play.

The team played it to the tune of five straight victories, including a no-hitter by Phil Gomez, one-hitters by both Phil and James Gomez (no relation to one another or to the team's coach, Carlos Gomez) and a dramatic extra-inning Phil Gomez three-run

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ABOVE: Coach Mark Eichhorn congratulates Brian Godoy as he brings in a run for the Aptos All-Stars Little League team.

LEFT: Aptos left-hander Kyle Anderson stretches out to deliver a pitch. Anderson will be starting for Aptos against Laramie, Wyo., today in the first of four round-robin Western Region tournament games Aptos will play this week in San Bernardino.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file

## Williamsport or bust for Aptos

By JULIE JAG  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

One form stuck out from the pile of paperwork the 11- and 12-year-old Aptos All-Stars had to sort through during their first days at the Western Region Little League Tournament in San Bernardino.

The form was a questionnaire handed out by ESPN for the network to use when it broadcasts the championship game, the one that will ultimately determine which of the six teams in the tourney will advance to the Little League World Series in Williamsport, Pa.

Saturday, the Aptos players pored over their questionnaires, hemming and hawing over such tough queries as "Who is your favorite professional baseball player?" and "What do you want to grow up to be other than a baseball player?"

But there was one question no one on the team had to think twice about. When asked,

"Who is your best friend?" the answer was automatic — my teammates.

"They've all become extremely good friends, not that they weren't already," said Dave Anderson, who manages the 12-player team along with coach Mark Eichhorn, a former big-league pitcher.

Aptos' solidarity is what makes Anderson think the team has a good shot at making a break for Williamsport. He said above all else, each of the 12 players is concerned with not letting his friends down.

Perhaps that stems from the fact that most of the 10 12-year-olds and two 11-year-olds on the team have spent over half their lives playing baseball together. Many of them competed in the same pee-wee league.

More recently, five returned from last year's all-star team, and six teamed together on the White Sox team that won the area 2002 Tournament of Champions in May.

Anyone who doubts the power of the play-

### 2002 Western Region Little League Tournament

■ **WHEN:** Opened Saturday, runs through Aug. 13. Aptos meets Laramie, Wyo., at 5 p.m. today.

■ **WHERE:** Al Houghton Stadium, San Bernardino

■ **WHO:** 6 state champions representing Northern California, Southern California, Arizona, Nevada, Utah and Wyoming.

■ **FORMAT:** Olympic-style round robin play. The top four teams at the end of that advance to single elimination semis and finals.

■ **LOCAL INTEREST:** Aptos is the first Santa Cruz County team to make it to the tournament since Watsonville American in 1986.

■ **ON THE WEB:** [www.unpage.org/west/wm-2002.htm](http://www.unpage.org/west/wm-2002.htm)

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Sentinel file

Watsonville American reached the Western Region tournament in 1986, the last county team to go that far.

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shot against La Puente to give Watsonville the unofficial state championship title.

It was an all-Gomez comeback performance for the ages.

"We just kept playing," says Phil, who went on to pitch in the Florida Marlins farm system for three years. "We went back there like we were going to win the tournament."

They settled for fifth, the last place awarded a trophy in what was then a 14-team tournament. Fifth best out of some 800 all-star teams in the western United States. Not too shabby.

"We had fun playing games and staying the rest of the week," says James. "It's a nice stadium, and we got to play under the lights in front of a lot of fans."

In the 16 years since, much has stayed the same. The kids and coaches still stay in barracks. A Disneyland excursion is still on the agenda. And the sermon of Little League lore will still be preached often during the week-and-a-half long tournament.

The only real difference, it seems, is the format. Now the regions have been broken down and the West only includes six teams. Those six will play a round-robin format — meaning no one-loss-and-you're-out — and the top four from that will square off in semifinal games.

Only the winner moves on to Williamsport, but statistically Aptos has a better shot than Watsonville American did because there are only six teams rather

than 12, and it's not single elimination.

Wherever Aptos' fortunes fall from here, there will be a lot of eyes back home keeping close tabs.

"It's great to have another local team do this," says James Gomez. "I think everyone who's into baseball watches this thing closely every year."

"It's a great experience; something they'll never forget the rest of their lives."

It might also help dictate some of the faces they'll see for years to come.

Gomez and Conley followed up their majors partnership on Pony and Colt League teams that also fell one step shy of their respective World Series. They went on to play together on Watsonville High's Central Coast Section semifinalist in 1991 and then played together at Cabrillo College.

Now it's again the Gomez and Conley show back at Watsonville High, where James is the coach and Phil works with pitchers.

"We're still good friends," says James. "I couldn't do it without Phil."

Come 5 p.m. this afternoon, Aptos will begin solidifying its own Little League legacy and likely some of those same lifelong friendships.

Only one team gets to pack its bags for Williamsport and keep the dream alive. But sometimes the legacy is built on the road to the World Series, in getting there and what happens when you do. The summer of 1986 taught us this.

Just ask Watsonville American.

Just ask Bill Buckner.

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## Aptos

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ers' friendship need look no further than the team's sem final loss to San Carlos in the Division II tournament.

Instead of hanging their heads, the Aptos players rallied together to hand San Carlos a defeat in the final, and thus become the second Santa Cruz County team in history to represent Northern California at the regional tournament.

Watsonville American advanced in 1986, but lost in the first round of the single-elimination tournament and ended up fifth.

"I was very impressed by how they reacted the other day," Anderson said of his team's comeback. "The kids were clearly down, but they weren't mad (at each other). They were mad because they let the team down. They were down, but were going to come back as a team."

Having an amicable roster may mean less infighting and more morale boosting in the dugout, but that relationship won't take a team too far if it lacks talent. Luckily, Aptos has that as well.

"Some teams we have played have had only one, two or three kids that got them that far. But our team is full of good hitters. Pitchers and defense," said 12-year-old Aptos catcher Drew McCauley.

Collectively, Aptos' batting average is about .300, Anderson said, and the defense has committed only a handful of errors on the season. In fact, Anderson said he had been told his team outscored opponents 90 to 12.

On the mound, Aptos boasts two solid starting pitchers in lefty Kyle Anderson and righthander Kevin Eichhorn.

Though Anderson didn't have sea-

### 2002 Aptos Majors All-Star Little League team

No.	Name, age	Position
00	Mark Lamothe, 11	reserve
1	Drew McCauley, 12	Catcher
3	Jarred Bachan, 11	2B/3B
7	Kyle Anderson, 12	P/OF
8	Kevin Eichhorn, 12	P/2B
9	Andrew Biancardi, 12	SS
10	Cesar Zermeno, 12	reserve
11	Tyler Raymond, 12	OF
14	Brian Godoy, 12	OF/3B
15	Kevin Farmer, 12	1B
24	Justin Burns, 12	reserve
25	Curtis Worden, 12	OF

**Manager** — Dave Anderson

**Coach** — Mark Eichhorn

Anderson (5-1) had an earned run average 2.00, while Eichhorn's was closer to 1.00

Anderson will be the one delivering the opening pitch for Aptos today. He said his game plan was to just take care of business as usual. "I'm going to try to strike as many guys out as I can, try to throw hard and have a really good changeup," he said.

Aside from teamwork and talent, Aptos packs size. The team boasts five kids 5-foot-5 or taller, including 6-foot outfielder Tyler Raymond, making it one of the tallest teams in the tournament. And in this game, size matters, Anderson said.

"The first thing coaches look at, at least we do, is size," he said. "Big kids have the ability to throw harder and hit harder. We're equally as big as anybody (here) and probably bigger than most."

The next largest team, and likely the one Aptos will have to be the most concerned with, is the Southern California representative West Ana-

West Anaheim, like Aptos, is new to the regional. Historically, however, its Southern California region has dominated the tournament. In the 1990s, Southern California teams went an impressive 44-4.

Last year, the SoCal representative, Oceanside American, advanced to the Little League World Series with a 12-8 victory over World Valley, Nev.

Aptos also needs to keep an eye out for the seasoned team from Taylorsville, Utah. Taylorsville has played in the regional tournament nine of the past 11 years, and while it hasn't traditionally fared well, a little experience can go a long way among the butterfly-infested fields and stomachs of the regional tournament.

The other three teams competing in the Western Region, which adheres to a round-robin format, include: Arrowhead, Ariz.; Peccole, Nev.; and Laramie, Wyo. Aptos will take on the teams' first game at 5 p.m. today.

By the time the teams play, Anderson said he will have a better idea about which teams will dominate the tournament because by then he will have seen all six teams play.

As of Saturday morning, he'd already watched Nevada defeat Utah, 4-2. And so far, he likes what he sees.

"We've beaten some teams we think are better than these guys," Anderson said. "Judging by what I saw, I think we can compete here."

If Anderson's right, then the Aptos players wouldn't have filled out that questionnaire for nothing.

Three victories this week should give them a chance to give the world an up-close look at just how far a little friendship, and a few other things, could get them by earning the opportunity to play in the championship game, which will be broadcast by ESPN2 at 7 p.m. on August 13.

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