

Alameda school's long-shot baseball team defies odds

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Sports stories -- factual and fictional -- abound about athletes and teams who achieve far more than expected (think, for example, "The Bad News Bears"). And then there are just as many other stories about teams that come together for a short time, only to quickly disband.

The Alameda Community Learning Center's baseball team, known as the Hawks, might well fit both narratives.

The Hawks, a team assembled in February from a charter school of some 130 eligible students (ACLCLC serves grades six through 12), defied the odds by advancing to the North Coast Section playoffs. ACLCLC's season came to an end May 23 in an 11-9 loss to Fremont Christian School in the opening round of NCS Division VI play. Still, the Hawks -- a team that might no longer exist next season -- had made their mark.

"Given the fact that (the ACLCLC players) had their first practice about a week before their first game, it was a little bit more than any of them expected," said Bara Waters, a team parent. "They lost their first game, but then they just jelled."

Playing as an independent -- the Hawks did not belong to any league -- ACLCLC finished 11-4 (13-5 with scrimmages thrown into the equation). And despite its lack of a home field, the team won four of five games after an opening loss at Pescadero High School, then rode a six-game winning streak to complete its regular season.

The Hawks was a team formed out of necessity. ACLCLC shares a campus with Encinal High, and for many years, ACLCLC student-athletes in grades nine through 12 were permitted to join Encinal's sports teams. This past school year, however, a change in eligibility rules barred ACLCLC students from those teams.

Determined to play high school baseball, ACLCLC senior Roberto Llamas and Waters' son, junior Eli Cassard, took matters into their own hands and began to organize a team. Ten other players soon joined co-captains Llamas and Cassard to form the 2012 ACLCLC Hawks.

"It ended up coming together so quickly," Waters said. "They had hoped to play informally, but then saw that they could actually have a competitive team. This was in January, and they scrambled to get it all done in February."

Other stumbling blocks remained, as the Hawks had to schedule games -- some many miles away -- against established opponents, including some playing in higher divisions. And rainouts raised concerns that the Hawks would not play enough games to be considered for an NCS berth. In the end, though, everything came together for the Hawks, on and off the field.

In addition to Llamas and Cassard, the Hawks consisted of Miles Baxter, Drew Fetzer, Ben Fetzer, Harley Finberg, Connor Finn, Moises Haro, Jericho Herrera, Joe Mangahas, Andres Vargas-Johnson and Liam Morgan. Roberto Llamas' father, Robert Llamas, agreed to coach the team, and ACLCLC graduate Alex Banks served as an assistant.

Eight of the players graduated recently, and, given an uncertain future, the ACLCLC Hawks might well be one-year wonders. Whatever the team's fate, the 2012 Hawks players will have plenty of baseball yarns to spin for years to come.

TOPS IN NATION

The Hawks were the top base-stealing high school team in the nation according to MaxPreps.com. ACLCLC and Parker-Birmingham, Ala., each finished with 278 stolen bases. Parker, however, had 296 steal attempts to ACLCLC's 288. Parker also played twice as many games as the Hawks.