

My Team

This past weekend, I attended my 4th NWLA Tournament (3rd playing) with the SWBL Cardinals. In years prior, our squads were solid. We were a guaranteed top 8 finisher, but we couldn't quite move ourselves into being considered a contender. Last year, we finally turned some heads. We managed to finish 2nd place after fighting our way through the loser's bracket, only to lose in heartbreaking fashion. We were bummed, but to be honest, we were excited. We now proved we could get there. We can be elite. We belonged.

In the weeks and days leading up to this year's tournament, there was a different feeling. Just like in previous years, we all agreed that we felt like little kids in the days before Christmas. Sure we still couldn't focus at work. The preparation was the same, but the mindset..... it was different. Instead of trying to prove we belonged with the elite, we were playing to finish what we couldn't the year prior. Success meant "2017 NWLA Tournament Champions: SWBL Cardinals".

This year didn't end with the "2017 NWLA Tournament Champions: SWBL Cardinals" headline. Rather it ended with, "Heartbreak Once More: SWBL Cardinals". We lost again in another 1-run nail biter. We were close, but this 2017 Tournament could have very easily ended with a 6th place finish. Love and Friendship drove this train to the very end.

We have a special group of guys on our squad. We all went to the same high school. All of us but Sam (old balls) have played on a sports team together, one way or another growing up. We have gone on family trips together, been in weddings, gotten in trouble, supported each other through heartbreak, driven across the country to see each other; we are best friends.

Some teams have a dominant ace, others have two! A few teams have a surplus of depth and other teams have experience. Sure, we are talented, but what makes us different than any other team is that we have a love and respect for each other that can't be broken.

On Saturday, we were cruising to our first win of the DE tournament when a routine grounder put our title hopes into question. We didn't know it at the time, but Chris Meador did some pretty bad damage to his hamstring. (Looks like his hamstring is at least partially torn, ask him for a picture). Chris knew that we didn't have a shot at redemption without him defending the third base line the rest of the tournament with his gold glove resume. He winced, he limped and hobbled, trying to see if he could walk on the lame leg. He got back on first base and finished the game and would go on to play in 6 more games! Chris loves this game, but he loves us even more. He did it for his team.

Gus Skibbe is in the conversation as the best all-around player in the country. In my opinion, he is our best player. Without Gus, we don't sniff the top 4 this year. He pitched big innings and provided much needed offense in pool play. If we had a little bit of a different wind pattern, he would of hit a dinger off Farkas. In the very next game after our first loss to WSEM,

Gus hit a 3-run bomb against KWL in the bottom of the 5th to put us up 4-2. In the loser's bracket finals, Gus hit a walk-off single against Hess to put us into the tournament finals. Gus is clutch and he did all of this with a bum hip! He is at his best when his team needs him the most. He loves this game, but he loves his team even more.

Sam Skibbe is the best hitter in the country. Don't waste time trying to convince me otherwise. He's the best. Just like his younger brother, he provided much needed pitching and offense in pool play. Sam is dependable and consistent. He never takes a year off. He consistently pitches in meaningful games and drives our offense. NOBODY hits Farkas, like Sam does. I don't know how, but he consistently puts hard hit balls in play off of the game's best pitcher. Sam had the game tying RBI against Hess in the loser's bracket finals with two outs and two strikes in the final inning, and came into the game in relief and shut HFWB down. Sam is willing to put himself into uncomfortable positions when his team needs him the most. Without Sam, we wouldn't have ever played in the NWLA Tournament and I am forever grateful for that. He spends countless hours organizing, preparing, podcasting and analyzing. He loves this game, but he does all of that for us. He loves his team.

Every team needs an ace. Jackson Crosley is our ace. He is so calm and even keeled on the bump. He had a coming out party last year and showed the wiffle-world that he is one of the game's best. This year, like many other team's aces, he didn't have his best stuff, but that didn't stop him from grinding out some big time innings for our team, still going 2-0. When he wasn't pitching, he was being a great teammate. Jackson is the perfect balance of competitiveness and chill. On the field, he's all business. Off of the field, he's the nicest guy you'll ever meet. Fun fact about Jax: He drove the last 3 hours of our drive home Sunday night at 1 am, just so the other guys could get some sleep before a long day at work. He loves his team.

Every team needs dependable depth. Scott Pohle (Pole-Eee) was that depth for us this year. Scott is a starter and star player on most teams at the NWLA Tournament. The guy can flat out hit the ball. I'm still waiting on those stats, but he was great in his first ever exposure to fast pitch. If it weren't for lack of experience, he is probably hitting for me in the entire DE bracket. Scott knows he's a good hitter and knows he would've been successful if he got the opportunity, but we sat him. Not one time did you hear a complaint or "woe me". Scott saw the bigger picture. He knew his role. He was there to support his guys however he could. I truly believe this: We don't make the top 4 without Scott Pohle being on our squad. Scott loves his new team.

It's tough to evaluate your own performance without patting yourself on the back or being overly critical, but I'm going to give it a shot. I'm not our best hitter, our best fielder, or our best pitcher. The only thing I know I do well is leave everything on the field. I give everything I do, my best effort. I always find myself analyzing and evaluating. "If we do X, then Y will happen". Time flies in just a few days of wiffle ball, but I saw my team transform this weekend.

Watching Chris battle and grind through that painful injury gave me the strength to pitch with numb fingers. Playing alongside Gus showed me that you play your ass off until the game is over because ANYTHING can happen. Watching Sam gave me confidence that we can beat anybody. Jackson proved that even when you don't have your best stuff, your team will pick you up. Scott showed how important it is to be a good teammate.

I would call myself a veteran of this tournament. Over the years, I have seen it all. I have literally seen teams with a lead, arguing over who is hitting where or who was going to pitch next. I have seen guys curse their teammate out over a tough loss. I have heard players talk negatively about their teammate behind his back. I have seen players demand that they play a certain position, or they would quit. That doesn't happen on this team. It's wiffleball sure, but for this team it's more love, respect and friendship.

One thing I've learned over my young life is a person's true character is shown when faced with adversity. I learned all that I will ever need to know about my teammates. Who would have thought that a short weekend in July would define a friendship? I love this team more than anything and I couldn't possibly imagine where I would be without them.

I'd rather lose with this team than win with anybody else.

We have won.