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New Jersey: The team that prays together, wins together

The boys from Jackson, New Jersey, were facing elimination from post-season baseball.

With the game tied at 4-4 with two outs in the bottom of the seventh inning, a team from Manchester had a runner on second base. The next batter hit the ball up the middle. Jackson's center fielder was playing deep and it was apparent the winning run was going to score.

Just then, "the player running around third base fell down and got tagged out at first," remembers Coach William Carlock. "We scored three runs in the top of the eighth inning. Their team scored two and we shut them down."

Carlock believes his team's success and destiny, even, is directly tied to prayer.

"Somebody tripped him and it wasn't me," Carlock said. "He didn't trip over the bench. We just believe that we're destined to do something good."

A Manhattan construction worker, Carlock said he is a Christian and a very religious person. He and four other adults formed a small prayer group and prayed before one of the team's games.

The team won. The prayer group grew to include players and more adults. The team kept winning.

"We started with five people in a prayer group," Carlock said. "We built it up to 60."

From the time of that first prayer session to the time the team arrived in Taylor, it had not lost a game, he said. The players won the New Jersey state championship. They became the USA Eastern Regional title. Pretty soon, they had an 11-game winning streak.

"I wanted to get God into all of the kids' lives," Carlock said. "We have a lot of Christian families. We give Him all the praise and all the glory whether we win or lose. We all hold hands before the game. We pray that God will make sure everybody is safe and healthy and everybody plays hard."

Greg Pascullo, a 14-year-old right fielder, said the power of prayer has made a difference.

"I've been praying since I can remember," said Pascullo. "It makes me determined to win."

In Taylor, the team formed a prayer circle just outside the baseball field. The As the adults and other family members prayed in the circle, the players gathered in the center. Pascullo said sometimes they read prayers from a book; other times, it "comes from people's hearts."

"I come from a Catholic family," he said. "I go to church as often as I can. It's just really important before every game to pray to God and ask him to help us so we can win and stay healthy."

Without prayer, Pascullo said, "I think we would still win. It's a lot easier when we pray. Knowing He's helping us gives us more confidence."

Jackson lost its opener and wound up 2-2 in round robin games in the USA Pool. The team finished in a three-way tie for second and just missed out on playing for the USA championship.

"We just try to teach the kids about life and let baseball get in the way," Carlock said. "We believe in faith and not fear. We always hope the underdog wins in life, not in baseball."

"We're Christians and we believe you have to have faith in Him first," added Israel Rivera, a team parent and one of the original five. "If you put Him first, He'll put you first. We wanted to use this team as a testimony to show everybody else how good and great He is. We wanted to show the kids, too."

-- Dave Gorgon

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