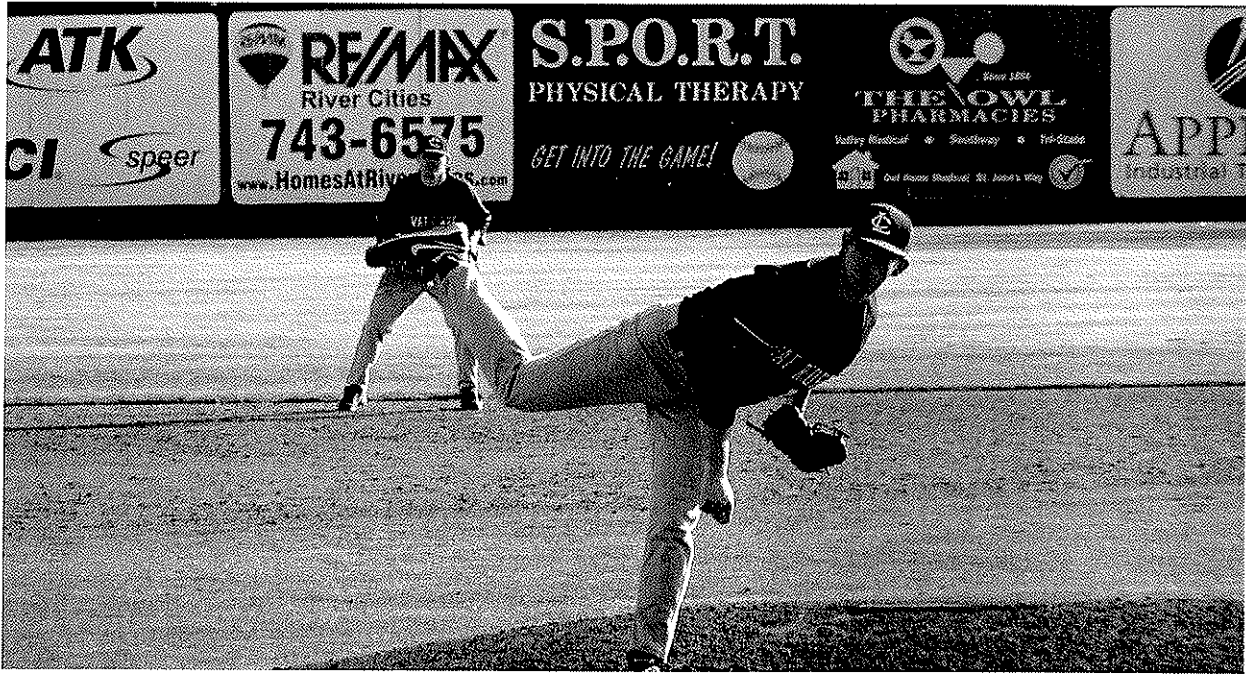


Success at every level

by Ryan Collingwood | Posted on Tuesday, April 10th, 2012

Former Lake City stars and longtime teammates Zach Clanton and Trent Bridges are now seniors at NAIA power Lewis-Clark State



Cd'A products Trent Bridges (back) and Zach Clanton (pitching) hope to lead Lewis-Clark State to its 17th NAIA baseball title.

LEWISTON — It's a scene that's stretched a shade over a decade for Lewis-Clark State seniors Zach Clanton and Trent Bridges.

In a jam, Clanton, a hard-throwing right-hander, will precede his almost-three-quarter delivery with a glance to first base followed by a death glare over right shoulder to second.

At the two-bag is Bridges — keeping a wary eye on a baserunner taking a generous lead while pounding his glove — inching toward second. Clanton has no desire to keep the runner honest and fires a fastball that hits the outside corner to end the inning.

Bridges, who graduated from Lake City in 2008 with Clanton, knows his longtime teammate wants to end an inning via strikeout when at all possible.

"He's a bulldog," said Bridges, a two-year starter. "There's not a better feeling for him than to get a strikeout or for me to get a game-winning hit. We just thrive off it and go about the game the same way."

Having played together since fourth grade, Clanton's watched Bridges knock in the deciding runs more times than he can remember. Bridges can't point to one particular time his pitcher iced an opponent's lineup. They were oft occurrences.

Occurrences that helped diminutive Coeur d'Alene reach Williamsport during a Little League World Series run in 2002. Occurrences that boosted Lake City to a 5A state championship in 2007.

All the north Idaho products know is winning. Ending up at the most storied small-college program in the country was only fitting.

"We've played on the same team since we were 10," Clanton said. "It seems like we've been a package deal ever since."

It wasn't supposed to be that way, though. Not originally.

Bridges, whose father Cory Bridges was Lake City's head coach, committed to L-C after his junior season. Clanton's destination wasn't concrete until late in the recruiting process and eventually committed to the College of Southern Idaho.

But, just before Clanton was to report to Twin Falls that August, an offer from the 16-time national champion surfaced. L-C's interest in Clanton may have come later than he would have liked, but it came.

"We wanted to play at L-C together, and Trent always said we would, but they never talked to me," Clanton said. "When they did I just remember getting a text saying 'I told you so'."

The two roomed together as freshmen and were immediately thrown into the hard-nosed routines orchestrated by legendary coach Ed Cheff, who ended up retiring in 2010.

The workouts were grueling. Every player was good. The coaches were surlier than the ones in prep and Legion ball.

To put it mildly, it was a sizable transition.

"It was pretty tough at first," Bridges said. "I remember looking at the older players and asking Zach 'Man, are we ever going to play here?'"

Bridges' playing time was scarce his first two seasons having played under a pair of second basemen who were taken in later rounds of the 2009 and 2010 MLB drafts. Clanton, however, experienced his most active season as a frosh.

The two ended up making the Warriors' NAIA World Series roster that year, which is cut down considerably. At that point the two figured their careers would be fruitful.

Now, as seniors, they're having their most complete seasons yet. Bridges has a team-leading .393 batting average and also leads in hits (59). After a pair of injury-riddled seasons, Clanton has a 4-0 record in 13 appearances.

The two's former legion coach Kyle Ahlf, who headed the Coeur d'Alene Lumbermen, isn't too surprised.

"Trent has always been the best player on any team he has been a part of. He's always been able to hit and I think he can get to the next level," Ahlf said. "Zach's always approached the mound with an attitude — like he wants to rip the heart out of each batter. Those two have always been winners."

There is still a glaring void for the two, however: A World Series title.

L-C, which plays host to the NAIA World Series each year, hasn't won it since winning three in a row from 2006-2008. If the ninth-ranked Warriors fail to win it again, their 2008 recruiting class would be first in program history to go four years without a title.

That's not something either wants on their plate.

"(The seniors) haven't won (a national title) yet, and that's a pretty big deal around here," said Clanton, who hopes to coach in college after graduation. "The expectations here are always high."

Cheff, the third-winningest coach in college baseball history, set the lofty standard.

There are currently 14 active players from L-C playing one level of professional baseball or another. Fingers are pointing to Bridges inking a deal somewhere this summer.

"What we've taken from Cheff — whether it be in life or baseball — we're going to take with us after college," Bridges said. "It's a different mindset."