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Kinston

NONE OF THEM HAD EVER COME THIS CLOSE. THEY WERE members of the team that many said was the best East Carolina University baseball had ever fielded, even though several players were walk-ons and few were recruited by major programs. Their ultimate destination, with just one team standing in the way, was Omaha, permanent site of the College World Series (CWS). And the Pirates were just two victories removed from that goal, facing the Tennessee Volunteers in nearby Kinston, North Carolina, as the higher seed and the host team.

After a heady victory in the NCAA Regional just six days earlier, the ECU baseball players were starting to give intellectual assent to what looked obvious on paper: They had a real shot at competing in Omaha's hallowed Rosenblatt Stadium as one of the top eight teams in the nation.

Standing just behind the third base line, his eyes fixed on the batter's box, was their head coach, the only one in purple who had been this close to Omaha before. Closer, actually. Nine years earlier, as a twenty-six-year-old head coach at Western Carolina, his team had been just two outs from defeating Florida State and blazing an improbable trail to the CWS. Since his arrival at ECU in 1997, Keith LeClair had been imprinting a new mental template in these Pirates. Omaha is not only a real and tangible goal, he told them, it's the only goal for a college baseball player. And, even for a school that had never won an NCAA regional before its new



coach arrived in 1997, Omaha was possible.

A hammering downpour soaked Grainger Stadium in Kinston on the Friday night before the first game, putting the schedule in doubt before the Super Regional even got underway. But the field dried out sufficiently, and a raucous ECU crowd made the short drive down NC-11 to be witnesses, they hoped, to history. The Pirates' roster featured a loaded senior class including Cliff Godwin and Joseph Hastings, who later became Division I coaches, and Chad Tracy, who went on to a solid major-league career with the Arizona Diamondbacks. Pitching for the Volunteers was Wyatt Allen, who would soon be selected in the first round of the Major League Baseball Amateur Draft.

Allen, the recently-named MVP of the NCAA Regional in Knoxville, hadn't slowed that momentum on the trip to Kinston. In his first six innings, he so silenced the Pirate bats that Tennessee had constructed a 9-2 lead. But then the East Carolina hitters heated up—Chad Tracy led the charge with a three-run home run in the eighth—and by the advent of the ninth inning the Pirates had surged to a 10-9 lead.

The most conflicted person on the field that day had to be Tennessee assistant coach Randy Mazey, who had served as an East Carolina assistant the season before and had recruited many of the players on both teams. He was also an old friend of LeClair's, and he knew that his friend had lost weight and had complained of some unusual symptoms in recent months. As he watched Keith across the field, he felt that the outcome of this tournament could be more enduring than most.

"The thing that I can see, like it was yesterday, was when Tennessee was up 9-7 in the eighth inning, and then Chad Tracy hit a three-run homer to take the lead. I looked at Keith, who was coaching third base, and he pumped his fist, got excited, and jumped up and down. Even though that home run took away the lead of the team I was coaching for,



LeClair congratulates Chad Tracy on his way around the bases in a 2001 NCAA Regional game against Winthrop in Wilson, N.C. Tracy went on to a successful major league career with the Arizona Diamondbacks.

I was really, really happy for Keith at that time.”

With hope in their throats, LeClair’s team took the field for the ninth, needing only to hold the visiting Vols and then defeat them the next day to book their Omaha flights. But Tennessee assembled a classic ninth-inning rally for a 13–10 win in a game several UT players called the best they had ever been a part of.

In the second game, ECU came out fighting again, leading 3–1 into the eighth inning. But Tennessee’s Stevie Daniels made his imprint in the eighth with a grand slam home run that erased ECU’s edge and led to a 6–3 win. That second Volunteer surge in as many days shut the door firmly on the most tantalizing College World Series hopes the Pirate Nation had ever tasted.

Of the sixteen regional tournaments and eleven Super Regional games that had been played to that point in 2001,

around 85 percent had gone to the home team. So that made ECU part of a heartbreaking minority, with a short trip back to Greenville ahead and a thrill-packed season over. It was no surprise that grown men—and elite athletes at that—were crying as the team gathered near the right field fence for LeClair's final postgame words.

“The thing I will always remember and carry with me everywhere from here on out is what Coach LeClair told us after that playoff game,” said Joe Hastings, one of the top hitters on that ECU team.

They sat in the outfield, an assembly of dashed hopes, and turned their attention to their coach. Just thirty-five years old and already a decade into his collegiate head coaching career, LeClair was still so strong that he could outlift any of them in the weight room. He was a man so driven he had once broken his wrist chasing a loose ball at a high school basketball scrimmage. As a player at Western Carolina University, he would beg his teammates to stay at the batting cages to pitch to him late into the night. He had always taken losses so hard that he avoided seeing anyone afterwards, choosing instead to steal away and dissect the elements of the game that had gone wrong. He had single-handedly made the word “Omaha” the heartbeat of the Pirate baseball program. If anyone had reason to feel disconsolate as Tennessee celebrated across the diamond, it was the man they called simply “Coach.”

He was visibly distraught as he reminded the players of how many hurdles they had cleared during the season. He said a word to honor the team's seniors, told them all he was proud of them, said all of the things that a coach who put his players first should say. But then he said something that seemed to freeze in the air, a statement that under other circumstances might have been remembered as mere inspiration. He told his team, “If this is the worst thing that ever happens to you, then you will have lived a successful life.”

As the players ambled away lead-footed to collect their

things and board the bus, LeClair spotted ECU athletic director Mike Hamrick across the field and walked to meet him behind second base. Hamrick, who calls LeClair the best hiring decision he has made in twenty years, was prepared to encourage the coach who had already taken his school's baseball program to unprecedented heights. Instead, LeClair spoke first, and with so much emotion that Hamrick was taken aback.

"I've let you down," LeClair said to Hamrick through tears. Everyone associated with ECU was devastated in those minutes, but Hamrick never thought to condemn his baseball coach for a season that had thrust ECU into the national spotlight.

Both encounters—the coach addressing his players and his boss—would have faded into the hearers' memories if life had continued in its normal rhythms—another offseason, fall conditioning, the hopeful dawn of a new schedule, more postseason opportunities, the whole thing ending and then starting all over again. But to those who loved Coach LeClair, everything about that weekend would later seem like it was written in bold type. His New Hampshire cadence as he answered questions from the media seemed a bit unsteady—they realized when they listened months later—even from a New Englander in the Deep South. They would recall how tired he was in the weeks before the regional, how much weight he was losing, how he seemed to get worn out from throwing batting practice.

And to a man, they said the same thing: "I think he knew."

It would be weeks before LeClair would have a name for the disease, and months before he would painstakingly rule out any other possibility. But he approached that postgame with a grim finality, and with the emotion of a man whose laser focus would soon be directed at a much more formidable opponent.



“I believe Keith knew,” Hamrick said. “I don’t think he’d officially been told. But I think he knew he was sick, and he knew that was his last chance to go to Omaha. And that was his whole dream.”

Four years later, in a letter to assistant coach George Whitfield, LeClair would reflect on that moment and conclude that, as unclear as the future was, the words he spoke to his team that day originated from a God who was in control.

“Thinking back on it, I believe God was speaking to me when I told the guys that if this is the worst thing that ever happens to you, you will have had a great life,” he wrote in January 2003. “Those were the last words I ever spoke in uniform. Oh, how quickly things change in the blink of an eye. All we truly have in life are our memories with our closest friends and what we do for others.”



**Coaching Third:
The Keith LeClair Story**
by Bethany Bradsher

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