

## Fullerton completes Titanic turnaround

By Will Kimmey

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OMAHA--Cal State Fullerton had just lost its second game at Texas in early March to fall to 9-10. Coach George Horton was walking through Disch-Falk Stadium when someone from Texas greeted him with a keep-your-head-up "See you in Omaha."



"Maybe we'll watch you on TV," Horton retorted, still angry at his team's play.

Horton's team eventually dipped to 15-16 before responding with a 32-6 run to finish the season as an unlikely College World Series winner. Cal State Fullerton became the first team to win the title without being one of the eight national seeds since the NCAA began that practice in 1999. The Titans finished the season with fewer wins (47) and more losses (22) than any national champion since Stanford won it all with a 46-23 mark in 1988.

"This is so unbelievable, especially with what the team has been through, so much adversity," DH Felipe Garcia said. "Deep down every guy on the club knew this was possible, and it's paid off."

It made for some interesting symmetry that the Titans won that title by beating Texas, a team that was ranked No. 1 or 2 virtually all season and one that was everything Fullerton wasn't early in the year.

"We spent about 45 minutes in that locker room after the game trying to become a team like Texas," Horton said.

Fullerton ultimately became a better team. But it didn't come easily. The players struggled to find their roles--and their confidence--early in the season. They worried about winning a starting job and pulled for themselves rather than understanding platoon duties or bullpen usage that was for the good of the team.

The CWS wasn't even a topic of discussion; the Titans just wanted to fight their way into the NCAA tournament.

"I thought it was a long shot," CWS most outstanding player Jason Windsor said. "I had a little bet with my buddy that we weren't going to host regionals. I still owe him a few bucks. I never dreamed we would be here."

A month after the Texas series, the Titans dropped two of three at home to Long Beach State to fall to that 15-16 mark. Horton was tired of reasoning with his players. He had them run 27 wind sprints in practice to remind them to play hard for 27 outs.

"There was so much negative body language and negative energy coming out of our dugout," Horton said. "Our heads were down; we were expecting failure."

"We couldn't put a momentum zero on the board after we scored. The inevitable was a leadoff single or a leadoff home run."

Then things started coming together. The Titans realized they couldn't right their record in one game, so they followed the lessons of sports psychology consultant Dr. Ken Ravizza, who reminded them to simply focus on winning the next pitch. The players realized their roles and made self-sacrifices to contribute to the greater good of the team.

"We just didn't give up on each other," lefthander Ricky Romero said. "We just stuck by each other's side and committed to each other all year."

They began to rally around a saying senior P.J. Pilitterre liked to use when the team was down a run in the late innings. *Think how good it's going to feel.* He'd use to spur his team to a late comeback. The Titans got hot during the season's second half, streaking through the Big West with a conference record 19 wins and just two losses to get to 36-20.

"We started rolling in conference," third baseman Ronnie Prettyman said. "We realized we could play some good baseball."

That feeling carried over to the postseason, and into Omaha, where Pilitterre wrote his saying on a piece of tape inside the Fullerton dugout.

He was wearing that tape across his chest like a beauty pageant winner after the saying helped inspire the team to a three-run rally in the bottom of the seventh in the title-clinching game against Texas.

"It's just a microcosm," Pilitterre said. "Early in the year if we were down 2-0, we were done. We were getting cut up. But we found a way. And it feels pretty good right now."

No one outside the Fullerton program noticed the turnaround more than Texas, which was denied its second championship in three years by a team it handled earlier in the year.

"They're a different team," Texas lefthander J.P. Howell said. "They're more confident. They know what kind of team they are. And they know how to win."

Beating Texas completed Fullerton's season U-turn. The Titans enjoyed their greatest moment of jubilation against a team that earlier had sent it to its worst time of despair.

"It's kind of funny to look back on that now," Pilitterre said. "We were on the verge of death and now we just won the national championship. That's mind-boggling."