

Bridgewater/Raritan High School, which opened in 1959, has had only one State Champion baseball team. That team was the B/R "West" Falcons in 1989. In some ways they were an unlikely candidate to win the state championship. Their overall record would be just 19-7. They did not have the impressive batting averages and power hitter stats that often categorize top baseball teams. What they did have was balanced and clutch hitting, speed on the bases, superb fielding, an all-state pitcher, and excellent coaches.

The B/R H.S. "West" Baseball program had been lackluster in the early 1980s. That changed in 1987 when experienced coach Norm Hewitt was hired to coach the team. Norm had an extensive baseball background from his days as a pitcher and fine hitter in college to his decade of coaching at Hillsborough High School, Rutgers, and Drew University. He was a student of the game.

One player, Dan Engelhardt, remembers a pivotal moment in Coach Hewitt's evolution of the team.

"In a game the year before the championship season our team was no-hit by Piscataway. Coach Hewitt met with us in the locker room and explained how we were so much better than that – and that we could do great things. Going forward the coach said we needed to be dedicated and take each practice and game seriously. After that the guys gave 100%."

The assistant coach was Chuck Nelson. He was a good compliment to Coach Hewitt. While Coach Hewitt was the serious one, Coach Nelson was the fun coach - always telling jokes. Some called him "the king of the one liners".

The team's star player was all-state pitcher Bobby Collins. He would amass a 10-2 record that year - throwing several shutouts along the way. Bobby could also hit – when not pitching he was the DH. Other pitchers were Mark Crawford, who also played centerfield, and Dave Dudeck. Behind the plate at catcher was Peter Iovine. At first base was (2nd team All-County) Dan Engelhardt who also started on the B/R H.S. state championship "basketball" team that year. At second base was All-County Mike Lynch. He led the team in home runs with five. Mike was part of a good double play combination with shortstop Mike Winchock who was also All-County. At third was steady fielder John Fidacaro. The outfield was made up of left fielder Otto Gsell, centerfield was (second team All-County) Mark Crawford, and Todd Zaninelli was in right field.

During the regular season the team found ways to win. A different guy rose to the occasion each game. Game 1 saw Collins pitch a 3 hitter. The next game saw pitcher Mark Crawford provide the winning hit with a two-run single in the final inning in a 3-2 win. Another game saw Peter Iovine's two run single put them ahead for good against local rival Somerville. At times it was their coaching decisions that gave them the margin of victory. Against Watchung they would pull out a 5-4 win when Otto Gsell laid down a suicide squeeze bunt that scored the winning run. Other times flashes of offense gave them the victory. One game against Hillsborough was a scoreless tie late in the game when back-to-back homers by Mike Lynch and Mike Winchock cemented a 3-0 shutout win. At times Bobby Collins would be the star even when he was not pitching. One game he knocked in five runs including three on a home run leading the team to a 7-3 win over Watchung Hills.

They would lose some games along the way, but they won enough to qualify for the State Tournament. Their record would make them appear to be the underdogs the other teams had fewer losses. However, the Central Jersey Division that they played in was one of the toughest in the state. That had prepared them for the tournament ahead.

The State Tournament

The first game of the State Tournament was against Holmdel. Here pitcher Dave Dudeck threw a one-hitter for a 3-0 victory. Bridgewater got all the runs they needed in the first inning as Mark Crawford and Mike Lynch both scored on sacrifice flies. Later in the fourth a double by Zaninelli drove home the third run.

In their next game the Bridgewater / Raritan Falcon's pitching dominated again when staff ace Bobby Collins tossed a three hitter against Shore Regional. Again, the Falcons scored early. All three runs were scored in the first inning with the big hit being Dan Englehardt's double. Shore Regional threatened in the sixth inning when they loaded the bases with one out. But great pitchers come through in such situations and Bobby Collins was one of them. He struck out the next batter then got the third out with a soft grounder back to the mound to end the inning.

The third game of the tournament saw Dave Dudeck again take the mound this time against Freehold. It would be a difficult game to win as the opposing pitcher came into the game undefeated. And to add further to the challenge, it appeared that Coach Hewitt could not be there as days before he had to fly to Alabama to check on his daughter who had become very ill. But by getting up at 4 AM for an early flight he made it to the playing field 5 minutes before the game started. His last-minute arrival sent a charge through his team. (His daughter would recover.) The Falcons rose to the occasion. In the third inning their base running led to two runs being scored. Mark Crawford walked, then stole second. Mike Lynch knocked him in with a single and went to third on an outfield error. Englehardt then walked. Then his steal of second base caused a throwing error that allowed Lynch to score. They held a 2-1 lead until the sixth inning when they erupted for four runs sending the previously undefeated Freehold pitcher to the bench. Dudeck held Freehold to just 5 hits and one run. Final was 7-1.

The Big Inning

The semi-final game was against Pennsville. This would be the one game they almost lost. Bobby Collins was locked in a pitching duel in a scoreless tie when he waked in a run in the top of the fourth inning. Then with the bases still loaded and two outs, Pennsville looked like they would break the game wide open when the next batter launched a pop fly that seemed like it would fall in shallow centerfield scoring two runs. But Mike Lynch made a highlight film over the shoulder catch to get the third out. The inning was over, but they still trailed 1-0. The Falcons failed to score in the fourth and fifth inning of the seven inning game. Time was running out. In the sixth inning Winchock led off with a single. Collins followed with another single. Gsell struck out for the first out. Then Todd Zaninelli walked to load the bases. Down by a run with a man on third Pennsville expected the Falcons to bunt so they adjusted their defense accordingly. However it made no difference. Coach Hewitt called for the squeeze bunt. Mike Winchock charged toward home on the pitch as Peter Iovine laid down a perfect bunt. That bunt

play is designed to score the runner from third sacrificing the hitter to an easy out. However this was the perfect bunt that rolled between the third baseman and pitcher. Winchock scored from third and Iovine made it safe to first base. The game was tied and the bases were still loaded. The next hitter Crawford tagged a line-drive single to right scoring two runs giving them the lead. Mike Lynch then put a fly ball over the left fielder's head just short of the fence for a triple. Englehardt singled to score him. Just minutes before the team was on the verge of defeat and thus elimination from the State Tournament, but now they led 6-1. Collins would put Pennsville down in the final inning and the Falcons were on their way to play in the State Championship Game.

The Championship Game

The Championship game was against Rutherford. It was scheduled just two days after the semi-final. Thus ace pitcher Bobby Collins could not pitch on just one day's rest. Dave Dudeck was scheduled to start. But it rained on the scheduled date and the game was moved to the next day. Collins would now have 2 days' rest. Perhaps he could take the mound. Coach Hewitt debated the situation. Would it be a tired Collins or a fresh Dudeck? He decided to start Dudeck as he had two excellent starts in the tournament. But if Dudeck got in trouble, Collins could relieve him.

Dudeck started the game as planned. He pitched two innings giving up one run. But his control was off and his curve was not breaking as it had in the last two games. So Coach Hewitt decided bring Collins into pitch to start the third inning.

In the fourth inning with the score tied 1-1 the Falcons broke the game open. Englehardt and Collins singled. With one out Otto Gsell drove a double down the left field line scoring a run. The next batter Zaninelli hit a grounder to short, but Collins was thrown out at the plate. This put Gsell on third with two outs. The Falcons were determined to score another run. On the first two pitches both Gsell and Coach Hewitt, who was coaching third, noticed that the left handed pitcher was paying no attention at all to Gsell on third. Coach Hewitt whispered to Gsell "steal if you want." On the next pitch Gsell broke for home as the pitcher wound up. The pitch was caught cleanly by the catcher who dove forward to apply the tag. But the daring base runner had gotten a good jump and he slid in head first under the tag – safe! The crowd (of 800) went wild. The Falcons now held a 3-1 lead. They would add another run that inning on an RBI single by Peter Iovine. The Falcons batters would add three more runs in the sixth inning. On the mound Collins shut down the Rutherford hitters the rest of the game. The final score was 7-2. The Bridgewater – Raritan High School "West" Falcons had the school's 1st State Championship in Baseball. They won the final game the way they had won all season long. It was great pitching, clutch hitting, daring base running (they stole 6 in 7 attempts) and excellent fielding. That evening the team, their parents, and classmates celebrated at the Old York Inn. Later a formal dinner was held at The Redwood Inn in Bridgewater. To this day they are the school's only State Champions in baseball. To see photos and articles about them logon to www.raritan-online.com.