

## Ex-Oceanside Little Leaguers relish memories of 2001's grand show

by Kevin Gemmell

SAN DIEGO - Each year before the start of the Little League World Series in South Williamsport, Pa., the massive hill that overlooks historic Lamade Stadium is green and lush. Then fans begin sliding down on cardboard boxes, leaving the hill brown and barren by the end of the two-week event.

In 2001, members of the Oceanside (Calif.) American Little League team wanted so badly to join in the tradition and slide down that hill.

"Not until we are done," manager Daryl Wasano instructed his squad, fearing injury to one of his players.

So when the Oceanside boys fell in the U.S. semifinals to a team from New York, eliminating them from youth baseball's red-carpet event, they scarfed down pizzas and went sliding down the hill on the boxes.

"That might be my best memory of the whole trip," said Richard Cranford, now a senior at Murrieta Valley High. "That was so awesome to finally slide down the hill."

They were boys being boys - and that's how they choose to remember their time at the Little League World Series.

The rest of the team either has graduated or decided not to continue playing. Some hope to play at the next level - either at a community college or as a walk-on at a four-year school. Some pursued other interests. And as four more prepare to graduate (Cerda is the only junior), they look back at their time in the limelight with adult eyes and adolescent wonder.

"Best summer of my life," Cranford said.

"So cool," Carroll said. "Everything about it was just so cool."

LITTLELEAGUERS - Former members of the Oceanside American Little League team that went to the Little League world series in 2001, are: David Carroll, Richard Cranford, Tyler Vernals, Matt Cerda, and Bobby Shore. 'Best summer of my life,' Cranford said of his World Series experience in South Williamsport, Pa. Photo by John Gibbins.

And yet no matter how fondly the players remember the 2001 Series, it - and they - are forever linked to Danny Almonte, the Bronx pitcher who gained national attention after hurling the tournament's first perfect game in almost 55 years during pool play. Later, in the U.S. semifinals, Almonte one-hit the Oceanside boys, striking out 16 of 18 batters.

The phenom's success attracted a glaring spotlight and a healthy dose of skepticism. It was discovered that Almonte's father had forged his son's birth certificate and he was really 14 - two years too old for the tournament. It became an international embarrassment for Little League and made Almonte as popular in Oceanside as William Tecumseh Sherman is in Georgia. Almonte's records were stricken from the books and his New York team forfeited its third-place finish.

"I want to ask him if it was all worth it," Carroll said.

"I want to face him again," said Cerda. "I don't think I'd say anything to him. I just want to hit against him."

Cerda will have to wait until after high school for a chance to see the left-hander again. Almonte, 20 (we think), recently signed with the Southern Illinois Miners of the independent Frontier League.

There will always be what-ifs when the players think about their showdown with Almonte and a blown call at second base that led to New York's 1-0 victory over the Oceanside team.

Cranford said not a day goes by that he doesn't think about his time in South Williamsport and the bad hand his team was dealt in that decisive New York game.

"I have all the tapes stacked in my room and every time I see the New York tape I get so frustrated," said Cranford, who plans to play at a community college next year while studying to be a firefighter.

At the time, the players said they didn't notice the cameras and glitz that surround the event. But when the Rancho Buena Vista Little League team finished third in South Williamsport in 2005, the Oceanside boys were able to watch as fans and saw how easy it is to become consumed with the pageantry of the Series.

"We really got into watching that team and it was so fun to sort of relive our memories through them," said Varnals. "They really hype it up. It's crazy. I don't remember it being like that."

None of the Oceanside players said they felt extra pressure to perform when they climbed on the high school stage. In fact, high school teammates all thought it was cool that they'd played in the Little League World Series.

Even if there was pressure, chances are this group of all-stars could handle it. To reach the Series, they had to negotiate the meat grinder that is the Southern California Divisional Tournament and the Western Regional Tournament in San Bernardino. Each year, the team that comes out of the West arguably has had the toughest road to South Williamsport.

"I think we learned a lot about what it means to be a teammate," Carroll said. "We really had to pick each other up. No one person can carry a team there. I think a lot of us knew early in the (all-star season) that this group was pretty special."

Perhaps it became clear when Oceanside American topped Perris Valley 31-0 in its first district game. Some say they knew at the first practice.

These days, they see each other in opposite dugouts. Cerda and Shore share the field, but Carroll, Varnals and Cranford are sporting different uniforms. Earlier in the season, Cranford closed out a game on the mound against Oceanside. Cerda got a hit, but Shore struck out.

"I was so mad that we lost that I didn't even realize it was him at first," Shore said. "I struck out. But it was a bad call."

At least we know Cranford isn't 20.

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