



Coach of the Year Larry Watkins, Petal

5th title one to cherish for Petal's plucky leader

Larry Watkins has coached more talented teams at Petal High School, including the Nate Rolison-led powerhouse in 1995 that many longtime Panther diehards would argue is the best to emerge from the baseball-crazy Pine Belt.

Yet there's something about this spring's run to the Class 6A state championship Watkins will keep near his heart forever. Maybe it's because the makeup of his fifth title club and first since 1999 reminds Watkins — a gritty shortstop who helped Meridian to a Class AA state title in 1971 — a lot of himself.

"I wasn't overly talented, but I think I always played the game hard and always played with a lot of confidence," Watkins said. "Confidence comes from being prepared and knowing you're ready to play. There's a difference between cockiness and confidence, but I think our kids go out on the field expecting to win.

"This year was really special because a lot of people didn't expect it. We only had three seniors, so there were a lot of kids starting on varsity for the first time. But I never saw them panic in a ballgame. We had some bumps early in the year but they were tough kids who would battle back when they got down."

That attitude helped Petal capture the decisive Game 3 of the 6A finals against a touted Madison Central team many suggested was a sure thing to win a second straight title. The Panthers couldn't hold a five-run lead in losing Game 2 before bouncing back for a stunning 15-7 rout two days later. It was

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a satisfying end to Petal's fourth trip to the state finals in six seasons.

Petal is ranked in the top 20 in the *Baseball America* and MaxPreps polls. "Sometimes that gets lost because a lot of times people only remember the winning team," said Watkins, who carried the 4A championship trophy back to Forrest County in 1990, '91, '95 and '99. "But we ran against some really good teams: Justin Woodall from Lafayette was throwing 97 (in 2006). Oxford (in 2005) was one of the best-hitting teams I'd seen in a while."

The title carried special meaning for another reason. It was the first for Watkins since his quadruple bypass heart surgery five years ago. "That makes you look at things a lot differently, too," he said. "You see things in life in a different way. I don't let things bother me as bad as they would've in the past."

That health scare, though, wasn't enough to push Watkins from the game. He'd faced a similar challenge in college after a car accident ended his playing career at Delta State. Watkins — one of countless high school baseball coaches in Mississippi with DSU ties — stayed close to the program through then-coach Boo Ferriss.

"Coach Ferriss took care of me up there," Watkins said. "His was the first call I got the day after we won the championship (last month)."

With five titles and a career record of 728-192 over 30 seasons (No. 4 in the state for wins), Watkins, 57, has secured a place among the greats of Mississippi high school baseball. Still, he's in no hurry to give up coaching.

"I'll see how it goes from year to year," he said. "I've still got a few seasons left in me. I enjoy it. I know I'll miss it when I do get out ... so I want to make sure I'm ready to get out when I finally decide to do it."

— Todd Kelly