

# Gullo, McKune, Bongiovanni take time to reflect on FHS's 2006 Class B title

Observer

June 9, 2016

“It seems like yesterday.”

That’s what Fredonia head baseball coach Vince Gullo said when asked if it seems like 10 years have passed since his Hillbillies won their first New York State Public High School Athletic Association Class B title in 2006.

“I’d really love to get together with all those guys,” Gullo added. “Because they’re the group that started this run of ours.”

The run actually began in 2005 when Fredonia lost in the Class B finals in Binghamton to Spackenkill. It has continued into 2016, as this year’s edition of the Fredonia varsity baseball team will be going for the school’s third state title since its first in 2006.

“We were so driven that year,” Gullo, who also coached the Hillbillies to a Class B title in 2013, said. “It was just a great experience and I was so happy for those kids. I was pretty tough on them, but it’s the closest team I’ve ever had. They persevered, they came through, they loved each other and they were rewarded with a state title.”

After defeating Plattsburgh, 16-0, in the semifinals, Fredonia, which finished 24-5 in 2006, took care of Babylon, 6-1, for the title. The Hillbillies, which Gullo believed were the No. 2 seed in the Section VI playoffs, had reached the Final Four by defeating Greece-Odyssey, 6-5, in the Far West Regional.

“I absolutely think we thought we had unfinished business,” Brian Bongiovanni, a senior on the 2006 team, and member of the 2005 team, said. “In 2005 we really didn’t know what we were getting into, and a little bit too naive. We got a taste of going to state and losing in the finals, but we knew we were good enough to get back (to Binghamton) and finish what we started.”

And finish it the Hillbillies did, as they made quick work of Plattsburgh, before defeating Babylon, behind the pitching of Abe Rak and Kevin Manzella.

“They weren’t just athletes,” assistant coach Jake McKune said. “They were baseball players, with baseball being their No. 1 sport.

“With Rak and Manzella, I certainly thought we had a chance to get back,” McKune added. “But during the season, Manzella had a little bit of a control problem. However, when we beat Falconer, 4-2, on Falconer’s home field ... We won that game and I think that was a springboard, so to speak, in really getting us going into the playoffs.”

Having been to Binghamton for the Class B Final Four in 2005, Gullo, McKune and Bongiovanni all felt that the team had what it took to get back again in 2006.

“When you have 10 seniors on the team, they’re going to be close,” McKune said. “And most of them, their No. 1 sport was baseball and that helped out a great deal.”

“We had seven returning starters,” Gullo added. “And that was our destination, Binghamton, and to get back and to win it. They were that first group of Fredonia boys that did that extra work. They were

committed to baseball. They played other sports, but baseball was their passion, and although it was an up and down season emotionally, those guys came ready to win.”

That 2006 team had a little bit of everything, but its most important attribute may have been the pitching of Manzella and Rak, who formed a formidable one-two punch.

“That season, Kevin Manzella and Abe Rak were phenomenal pitchers,” Gullo said. “And Brian Bongiovanni, Mark Zinni, Angelo Belliotti, Chad Shaw, Will Bobseine, Rich Catalano, Tommy Malikowski, Jeremy Napierala and Andy Schober, those guys went out there every day and competed and they were phenomenal.”

“Myself, Manzella and Rak got a lot of the publicity,” Bongiovanni noted. “But we had Zinni, Shaw and Malikowski, just to name a few. We had all played together throughout Little League, Babe Ruth and travel baseball and we didn’t always win, so it was nice to see all of that come together and come out on top.”

In a season full of lasting memories, McKune couldn’t help but go back to the Hillbillies’ 4-2 win over Falconer as the one moment that really seemed to bring the team together and show exactly what it was made of.

“We really weren’t sure, because Manzella was hard to read sometimes,” McKune said. “He would just go out there and give you everything you had, and against a very good Falconer team, on their own field, and losing Rak, who was disqualified in the second inning for wearing jewelry, and who later was named the Class B Player of the Year, Napierala stepped in and I think that was the game that was really the springboard for getting us ready for the playoffs. We knew we had the old Manzella back and we could play with anyone and be competitive.”

For Gullo it was a different lasting memory.

“What I remember most is we didn’t win a league title that year,” Gullo said. “Everybody went after us that year and threw their big guns. Although we didn’t win a league title, it made us playoff ready.”

After 10 years, players and coaches have all gone down different paths, but that doesn’t mean that members of the team don’t still see each other and remember just how special that 2006 season was for the Hillbillies.

“There’s a few guys that I still see regularly,” Gullo said. “Obviously (Brian) Bongiovanni and I have a very close relationship.”

“I keep in contact with a lot of the guys,” Bongiovanni, who spent several seasons as an assistant coach under Gullo said. “Zinni, Rak, Shaw, we all stay in contact and I still play baseball with a few of them. We definitely bonded, and the memories are the things we look back on. Winning that state championship is the thing that holds us all together.”