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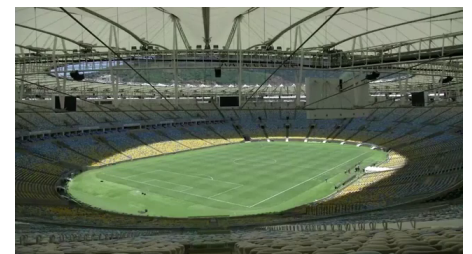
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Baseball pipeline flows from Las Vegas to Mesa, Ariz.



Nine Nevadans played on this year's Mesa CC national baseball championship team. Eight are from Las Vegas. (note: this is the regional championship trophy) FRONT ROW: Josh Murtha (Faith Lutheran) Drew Lacombe (Spring valley) Casey Moses (Centennial) BACK ROW: Kyle Richards (Reno Damonte Ranch), Casey Congleton (Centennial) , Evan Fresquez (Coronado), James Anderson (Coronado), Dillon Fahr (Coronado) , Ryan Chen (Arbor View) (Courtesy)



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Muricy downplays World Cup protest

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**By RON KANTOWSKI
LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL**

U.S. 93 is the main thoroughfare linking Las Vegas to the sleepy Phoenix suburb of Mesa, Ariz. If you drive it, you will see lots of Saguaro cacti and Joshua trees, and, if you get off the beaten path, perhaps even a rattlesnake or two. Watch your step around Wikieup.

If you drive it during early springtime, you'll probably also see lots of cars with Nevada license plates and baseball equipment bags strapped to luggage racks or poking out of rear windows.

There were eight local kids who played baseball at Mesa Community College this season. That's a pretty good story. All eight were major contributors to the Thunderbirds' success, and the T-Birds had a lot of success.



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Three were in the starting lineup when Mesa defeated Hinds Community College of Rankin, Miss., 9-7 in 11 innings to win the National Junior College Athletic Association Division II national championship in Enid, Okla., on May 31. A fourth local kid came out of the bullpen, worked 4 2/3 innings, and was the winning pitcher.

If only allocating water rights on the Colorado River were this amicable.

Tony Cirelli is the head baseball coach at Mesa CC. He's from New York City but he played baseball at Mesa and then at Arizona State. This was his 20th year as Mesa's coach, so it can be assumed he doesn't miss the subway that

much.

When we chatted Tuesday, Cirelli said there's a simple reason why a lot of local kids wind up playing for him. "There are a lot of good players (in Las Vegas), and everybody can't go to CSN, although that's a great program," he said.

Cirelli's cousin is Jake Hager, the Sierra Vista High standout who was selected in the first round of the 2011 major league draft by Tampa Bay and is now playing shortstop for the Double-A Montgomery Biscuits.

Cirelli said he had been watching his cousin play ball in Las Vegas, or at least keeping tabs on him, since Jake was 8 years old. So he knows of the talent here, and of our close-knit baseball community.

"The first ones we got out of there, in '04, were Kyler Newby and Bobby McMurray out of Bonanza," Cirelli said. "Newby's still playing (in Triple-A with Salt Lake). McMurray is about to graduate from medical school."

The current ones, listed in order of their Mesa jersey numbers, are Drew Lacombe, an infielder from Spring Valley; Dillon Fahr, an outfielder from Coronado; Joshua Murtha, a pitcher from Faith Lutheran; Casey Congleton, a pitcher from Centennial; James Anderson, an outfielder from Coronado; Casey Moses, an infielder from Centennial; Evan Fresquez, a pitcher from Coronado; and Ryan Chen, a pitcher from Arbor View.

Moses played shortstop, batted leadoff and had two hits in the national championship game. Lacombe played second base and had three hits; Fahr played left field and went 2-for-4. Fresquez was the winning pitcher, allowing three hits while walking two and striking out four in a clutch relief stint. Normally, he and Chen are starting pitchers.

The Thunderbirds took the long way to the title. They entered the World Series ranked No. 1 but lost their first game to Vincennes of Indiana, 9-4, before storming back to win five in a row.

It marked the second time in two months that a local kid or kids had helped a junior college from the Phoenix area win a national championship.

In March, Durango's Joel Feigler scored 17 points and made a basket in the final minute lifting Phoenix College to victory over Essex Community College of New Jersey in the men's basketball final. It was Phoenix's first national championship in 93 years.

Although Cirelli credits Newby and McMurray for getting the Las Vegas-to-Mesa pipeline flowing, that was just under him.

Before becoming the starting second baseman for the Boston Red Sox, Rancho's Marty Barrett was an All-American at Mesa CC, in 1978. Tom Barrett, Marty's brother, who had big league cups of coffee with the Phillies and Red Sox, also played at Mesa.

Tom Barrett, who makes his home in the Phoenix area, came by to wish the team well during one of the early playoff games, Cirelli said.

The national title was Mesa's first in 20 years, but this is a program that is well known and respected. In addition to the Barrett brothers, 18 other former Thunderbirds have gone on to play in the majors, including Hubie Brooks, Dave Collins, Mickey Hatcher, Mike Devereaux and Ken Phelps.

Cirelli has had 45 players drafted by major league teams. Only five also were selected out of high school. Maturity probably has something to do with that. So, it can be assumed, does his coaching.

In the 29 years Cirelli has been involved with the Mesa program as a player, assistant coach, or head coach, the team has qualified for the NJCAA playoffs 24 times.

That tradition, combined with a pleasant experience and word of mouth is what keeps the Las Vegas-to-Mesa baseball pipeline flowing, and those cacti and Joshua trees clicking by in the rear-view mirror during springtime.

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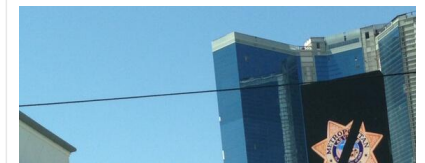
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