

# Once down and out, Fitchburg baseball team has bounced back

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There's nothing quite like a feel-good story.

Especially about an underdog team doing big things.

Take the Fitchburg High baseball program for example. It's sad to say, but it's the truth when I say that the Red Raider varsity baseball program has been near the bottom of the barrel in Central Mass. for a long time.

They were laughed at, not taken seriously and considered an easy 'W' on the schedule by opponents time and time again.

They couldn't hit, pitch or field consistently. It was tough to watch and cover games at times.

That's the cold, hard facts, too.

I can't sugarcoat it.

Something needed to be done. The losses just kept piling up and there was no hope in sight.

Desperate times call for desperate measures.

And Fitchburg High Athletic Director Ray Cosenza took it upon himself to try and resurrect the program from the Central Mass. cellar.

It hasn't been easy and there's been many losses along the way when Cosenza -- the fiery and extremely demanding former FHS football coach -- took over the program in 2015.

If you remember, Cosenza struggled to get his team wins with a 2-16 mark in 2015 and 1-17 last season.

But the Red Raiders kept on working.

One thing I noticed right away when Cosenza was back in charge was that his players hustled in and out of the dugout all the time. There was no walking, hanging their heads or goofing off.

It was all business with the Red Raiders.

Those are small steps in changing the culture of the program. It didn't translate into wins, however.

But these players and coaching staff kept grinding away, keeping their eye on the goal of improving this program.

Baby steps. That's all it was. Baby steps.

And those baby steps are now much bigger steps up. Up the division ranks, while upping their win total to six games, as of Tuesday, while also punching their ticket into the postseason for the first time since 2006 by securing at least a share of second place in the Mid-Wach C.

No one is laughing at the Red Raiders now.

Actually, people -- even those who wear the blue and white of rival Leominster -- are happy to see Fitchburg improving. Because no matter what anyone says, both Fitchburg and Leominster need each other to be good to consider this a true rivalry.

It's a process that has been pleasurable to watch unfold.

I'm seeing a team gain confidence by the day. The line drives that used to go in and out of the glove are now being easily gobbled up. The hitters are making solid contact against quality arms -- Fitchburg used to face the opposing No. 4 or 5 pitchers and still lose by a ton -- and the pitchers are throwing strikes, working ahead of the count and relying on their defense to make plays.

Good baseball teams know how to execute. Fitchburg is gaining on the competition.

I'm not going to sit here and say the Red Raiders are one of the elite programs in Central Mass. I'm simply tipping my hat to changing a culture, creating a positive, winning atmosphere and bringing respectability and pride back to a program that has been buried for far too long.

Baseball participation is on the rise in Fitchburg, as well. It's refreshing to hear that baseball isn't close to death in Fitchburg anymore.

And it's refreshing to see that Cosenza, his coaches and hard-working players, who deserve much of the credit, are leading the Fitchburg baseball revival in 2017.

There's no greater story this spring than the Fitchburg High baseball program. What an amazing feel-good story.

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