

# Notre Dame coach helps three different programs reach state tourney



In this June 12, 2004, photo, Notre Dame players celebrate their Class AA state championship victory over Joliet Catholic in Geneva. (BRIAN KERSEY/Associated Press)

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**T**he Notre Dame baseball team was six outs away from losing in the Class AA state semifinals back in 2004. Mike Paskvan, the pitching coach at the time, sat in the dugout thinking ahead to the pitching rotation for the third-place game. Then, coach Bob Kostuch walked by and said: "Get ready for the greatest comeback ever."

"And from that moment, I kind of snapped back out of it mentally and started focusing on the kids' approaches at bat," Paskvan said.

Notre Dame came back to win the game 11-10 after being down 9-3 after five inning.

It's probably one of the best finishes the two coach have ever been a part of, Kostuch said. He called it their "shining moment."

"That was the one moment I think that stands out through my coaching career is seeing the kids not give up in such a tight situation with only six outs in the game to get to the state championship game," Paskvan said.

That memory from Notre Dame's run to the 2004 state title stands out for Paskvan and Kostuch, but Paskvan's successful coaching career spans a variety of sports and plenty of state tournament appearances, too.

Paskvan, a Notre Dame physical education and health teacher, is the bass fishing assistant coach and his team participated in the state tournament on June 14-15. Notre Dame was one of 11 teams that did not catch any fish on Carlyle Lake at the state competition. However, Paskvan missed the tournament, which was rescheduled twice, on a fishing trip in Minnesota.

He also serves as an assistant coach on the freshman football team.

Paskvan previously coached the bowling team, first as an assistant and then as the head coach. He was an assistant when the Dons placed 12th as a team at state in 2015 and the head coach when they took 14th in 2016. He stepped away when he started working toward his Master's degree.

"I didn't know much about bowling at the time," Paskvan said. "But I learned each year by talking to the other coaches in our conference. I learned from the kids as well."

He tried to instill in his bowlers and pitchers a similar mental approach. From pitch to pitch, or from frame to frame in bowling, you've got to keep your emotions in check, he said.

Paskvan has fished his whole life and was interested in helping out, he said, adding that he picks the minds of students to learn their fishing knowledge. The bass fishing team has advanced to state four times, finishing third four years ago.

Paskvan's path to coaching evolved after his pitching career was cut short.

Paskvan was part of a Division III national championship team at Joliet Junior College as a freshman; the Wolves finished second the next season. Then he transferred to Northeastern Illinois for two years, playing for a team that advanced to the regionals of the 1996 NCAA Division I Tournament.

He even played some competitive tennis for the first time with his fifth year of eligibility.

He played 1 1/2 years of independent league baseball for the Will County Cheetahs, who are now known as the Windy City ThunderBolts. But he tore his labrum in his shoulder, which just kept tearing even after he tried to come back from rehabbing the injury.

Paskvan's dream was to make it to the major leagues. Once injuries shattered that, he started to think about the next steps with his criminology and business law education, perhaps following in the footsteps of his father and uncle to become a police officer.

"I started to think, 'You know what? Is it really a thing for me because of what my family members did, or do I want to be involved in something I was passionate about?'" Paskvan said. "And that was baseball."

He got his education degree from Northeastern Illinois after his independent league baseball days were over.

Paskvan met Kostuch at Northeastern Illinois and when Kostuch became Notre Dame's baseball coach in 2003, he asked Paskvan to join his staff as the pitching coach. Paskvan took the opportunity and "absolutely loved it," Paskvan said.

"Being able to pass down the knowledge ... onto high school kids and seeing them succeed on the playing field or even in the classroom, it's very fulfilling as a teacher and a coach," Paskvan said.

In the 2004 state championship game, Joliet Catholic knocked Notre Dame's starter out of the game in the third inning. With four runs already in and the bases loaded, Paskvan turned to Greg Reda.

The senior right-hander entered the state tournament with just 16  $\frac{2}{3}$  innings pitched, second fewest on the team, all season. Kostuch was skeptical but trusted his pitching coach with the move. Reda struck out the first batter he faced to get out of the third and proceeded to toss 4  $\frac{1}{3}$  innings of no-hit baseball to lead the Dons to the title.

"I really didn't think it was going to work out," said Kostuch, who is now director of student activities at Notre Dame. "But he knows his guys."

All the state appearances aside, it's the relationships Paskvan has built with athletes that stands out so much. Others that know him, and even Paskvan, too, note that he's very humble, but it's fulfilling for him to see kids have success in their sports and in the classroom.

"They're taking that stuff that we give to them and then now they're actually applying it in the real world," Paskvan said.

He's also a very organized coach, said Dons athletic director and football coach Mike Hennessey, which is a necessary skill for success. The relationships he develops with his athletes also fosters success, according to Hennessey.

"I think that's where he develops a real sense of trust, and the boys then have confidence in what he's trying to teach them," Hennessey said. "That's where the good things end up flowing from, when you've established that kind of relationship with the kids."

One of the biggest bits Paskvan like to pass along is: "Win with class, you lose with class." He recalled a former player telling him about how he passed this on to his college teammates, too. If there's a bad loss and things didn't go well, you can just move on to the next day because there's another game in a long season of baseball, according to Paskvan.

All his state tournament success isn't a fluke, Kostuch said.

"His ability to read his players and then to relate to them, I think that's unmatched of any other pitching coach that I've worked with," Kostuch said.

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