

Crusade Complete: St. Bernard's 3-peats in NCS baseball

Neil Tarpey/The Times-Standard

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EUREKA -- The third time wasn't a charm. It was a conquest.

The St. Bernard's baseball team scored seven runs in the first inning, and Andrew Ayers pitched a three-hitter, as the Crusaders captured their third consecutive North Coast Section crown with a conclusive 14-1 victory over Tomales High in the Division VI championship Saturday.

"We came out and hit the ball," said St. Bernard's head coach Dale Del Grande, whose team banged out 17 base hits. "We've got a talented group, a very good ballclub. They were a bunch of blue-collar players who were cogs in the machine."

After locking up the last two NCS Class B titles -- including a 10-1 win over Tomales in 2007 -- the Crusaders outscored this year's three playoff opponents by a combined 47-1, and won their final 14 games of the season to finish with a 21-1 record.

St. Bernard's only defeat was to Miramonte High (23-3-1), who took the NCS Division III title Saturday with a 1-0 defeat of Sir Francis Drake at the Oakland Coliseum.

Tomales, the North Central II South League champions who entered Saturday's title game without a loss in its 11 previous games, ended the year 18-5-1.

"We knew we had to play our A-game, and we just didn't," said Braves head coach Bill Tucker.

Ayers struck out 11 without a walk and allowed only one unearned run, as he threw a complete-game victory in a NCS title game for the third successive year, including last year's no-hitter of International High.

His only difficult spot Saturday occurred in the top of the fourth.

Tomales catcher Brett Bell -- who had two of the Braves' three hits and scored their run -- lead off with a double to left, and one out later, Andrew Murphy's single to right put runners at the corners.

But Ayers stranded Bell and Murphy by striking out the next two hitters.

The Crusader's right-hander also had a big day at the plate, batting 3-for-5 with a double and four RBIs.

"I was just trying to be loose up there," said Ayers.

Leadoff hitter David Del Grande was the catalyst who sparked the St. Bernard's offense.

The shortstop reached base all five times -- on a triple, two singles, a walk and as a hit batsman -- scored twice, and knocked in four runs.

Lane Stapp, Cody Johnsen and James Pastori each contributed two hits for the Crusaders.

On defense, the game was not without its miscues, as both teams combined to commit six infield errors, but the Braves turned two double plays.

St. Bernard's outfielder Josh Genevro turned in the game's web gem when he made a running dive in

right-center field to nab Murphy's sinking liner for the third out in the top of the first.

"It's great to win again," said Genevro. "It comes down to us being a team."

Finally, in looking back over the 2009 season, Del Grande made known something that he had not told his players.

"I dedicated this season to Jim Vallee," said Del Grande about the long-time coach and community member who passed away before the season. "A lot of these guys played little league for him. He was a mentor to these kids."