

# THE EUREKA REPORTER



McKinleyville baseball celebrates a first North Coast Section Championship in 11 years Saturday afternoon

## **Panthers pride**

by Jackie Christensen, 6/3/2006

For the first time in 11 years, the McKinleyville High baseball team is the Redwood Empire's Class 2A North Coast Section champion.

Fueled by a fifth-inning, five-run rally, the Panthers took a 9-4 lead into the bottom of the seventh inning.

Then — in the classic dramatic fashion Panther fans have become so accustomed to over the course of a rollercoaster season — Healdsburg managed to get the tying run to first base with only one out.

Leading 9-7 with runners on first and third, Mack head coach Dustin Dutra called upon Nick Rasines to close the game, and the pitcher delivered, getting a pop-out and a game-ending strikeout.

"It's a hard feeling to describe," Dutra said. "I'm just so happy for them. It's just been an outstanding season, and to watch it culminate at the NCS championship is amazing."

The Panthers didn't waste any time setting the tone against the Greyhounds No. 1 pitcher Mitch Sindle, as Rasines sent a loud and clear message screaming into the right-center field gap on the first pitch of the game for a double.

After advancing to third on a bunt from Bailey Mason, Rasines scored on one of three misplayed bunts by Sindle, to give Mack a 1-0 lead.

The Greyhounds, who weren't about to go anywhere silently, responded in the bottom of the second with a run, then added another in the third to take a 2-1 lead.

Then Healdsburg scored two more runs in the fourth inning to widen its lead to 4-1, and with its dugout overflowing with confidence, things weren't looking too good for the old boys of Mack town.

But, as the saying goes, if at first you don't succeed, try, try again.

After failing to capitalize in the fourth inning off of a bases-loaded, no-out situation, the Panthers once again loaded the bases with no outs in the fifth inning.

This time, however, the Panthers didn't let the Hounds off the hook so easily as they plated five runs on four singles, a hit by pitch and a walk, to reclaim a 6-4 lead.

The Panthers kept the ball rolling in the sixth inning, off of a double from Andrew Hanger and a single from Rasines for two more runs.

In the top of the seventh, McKinleyville added yet another insurance run for a 9-4 lead, but, as any Mack fans in the stands could contest to, the game was far from over.

Two consecutive Healdsburg singles from leadoff batter Jake Miller and Kory Hirtzer, and a walk to Norm Lausten, and the bases were loaded with no outs.

A grounder to short scored Miller. Another walk and a two-RBI single scored two more runs, and all of a sudden, the impossible had become a reality.

But, in typical Panther form, McKinleyville rose above the adversity of pressure with senior leadership, and brought the NCS championship pennant to their school.

"All the credit, all the recognition should go to these players," Dutra said. "I'm just fortunate to have had the opportunity to coach them."

Mack starting pitcher Tom Jaso — who uncharacteristically walked four batters in 6 and 1/3 innings pitched — struck out five and only allowed six hits in the victory.

"If you would have told us at the beginning of the season that we would be North Coast Section champions, we wouldn't have believed you," Jaso said. "We got down and it was looking grim for a while, but we all knew we were

going to come back.”



The Panthers celebrate their first NCS championship in baseball in 11 years at Santa Rosa JC Saturday afternoon. Jackie Christensen/The Eureka Reporter