



Matt Lenz and coach Dean Santorio pose for a photo at the baseball field on Grand Island Thursday.

James P. McCoy / Buffalo News

Grand Island's victory has mystical moments

By **Keith McShea**

News Sports Reporter

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It was the bottom of the 10th inning in Tuesday's state regional playoff game, and things did not look good for the Grand Island baseball team. The Vikings were trailing by three runs and were down to their final out.

With runners at first and third, GI coach Dean Santorio decided to make the move, one he'd been thinking about all day.

"Hey Matt!" he yelled from his third-base coaching box into the dugout a few steps away.

Junior Matt Lenz wasn't sure the coach was talking to him.

"He says, 'Me?' Santorio recalled. "I'm like, 'Yeah, you.'"

The 5-foot-10, 240-pound Lenz plays first base -- he is also an offensive lineman for Santorio's football team. Looking at the players in the GI dugout, he would not be your first choice to pinch run. If you were a fan from Honeoye Falls-Lima, GI's opponent that day, it wouldn't appear to make much sense.

But if you were from Grand Island, like one of the hundreds who made the short drive north to Sal Maglie Stadium in Niagara Falls that evening, you stood up and cheered.

That's because at 10 o'clock that morning, Matt Lenz was sitting in a front pew at St. Stephen's Church, attending the funeral of his father.

This story starts with a coach wanting to do the right thing. What happened next was, for those who were a part of it, "amazing," "unbelievable," and any superlative in between. It was a feel-good story that turned into a feel-great story.

"I don't know what I believe or anyone else believes," said Santorio, "but someone was looking over us and something special happened."

"In 39 years in high school sports," Grand Island Athletic Director Jon Roth said, "I've never seen anything like it."

Ken Lenz, father of Matt and four other boys, loved baseball. He called it "a thinking man's game." He coached Little League and helped teach the game to many of the current varsity Vikings. A little over a year ago, he fell ill to cancer.

Around Memorial Day, the cancer intensified. The Grand Island team signed a maple baseball bat covered with well wishes that was delivered to Ken Lenz at his bedside in the hospital by another team father, Mike Chorey. The team dedicated its wins last week in the Section VI Class A-1 final and the overall A title to Matt Lenz and his family. Matt brought the game balls to his father's bedside, and told him every detail of each game.

On the morning of June 1, the day after the A title game, Ken Lenz passed away.

The entire team attended Tuesday's memorial service. Afterward, a few people asked Santorio about something he had already thought about: "Coach, do you think there's any way that Matt can get in the game?"

The Far West Regionals mark one of the most important games for any team fortunate to advance to them. It matches up the champions from Sections VI and V (the Rochester area), and the prize is a trip to the state final four.

Santorio hoped that he'd be able to get Lenz -- who has seen limited action in about 10 games this year for the deep, senior-laden Vikings -- into the game somehow. He considered having him start and then taking him out, but that would have left GI -- which was already playing without University of Hartford-bound standout John McGinty -- limited to what it could do with substitutions. It turned out to be a typical playoff game, a one-run contest that GI tied in the bottom of the seventh on a sacrifice fly by Drew Chorey, Mike's son.

Then Honeoye Falls-Lima scored three times in the top of the 10th.

Grand Island's first batter struck out. There was a 1-2 count on C.J. Fadel.

"I thought, if we get out, I'm going to let him hit with two outs just to let him get his swings in," Santorio said.

But Fadel worked his way to a walk. The next batter, No. 9 hitter Jesse Ciffa, singled to put runners at first and second. Kevin Dobson hit a fly ball that became a sacrifice when the speedy Fadel tagged up and advanced to third.

"I'm coaching the game to win as it unfolds, but I have to be honest, I wasn't thinking we're coming back and winning," Santorio said. "We'll get him in the game, and we've had a great season. If we score him, even better. If he scores our last run of the season, wow, that would be awesome."

Santorio called into the dugout to Lenz to pinch run for Fadel.

Had he ever pinch run before? "No," Lenz said with a laugh.

Lenz took the field and stepped on third base. The 500 or so fans from Grand Island assembled on the metal bleachers, including his mother, Lori, and all four of his brothers, were on their feet for a stirring standing ovation.

That moment was special enough. But that was just the start.

"The whole game changed when Matt Lenz stepped on third base," said senior Dylan Kelly. "We definitely didn't see it coming."

Jon Voyzey came to the plate, and Santorio gave him a fist-pump. Translation: Bring Lenz home.

"I still didn't think we had a chance -- said Voyzey. I just wanted to get him in, and for everybody to go nuts for him like they did when he came in the game."

That's what he did, and that's what happened.

The entire Grand Island team -- all with the initials "KL" written on their caps -- met Lenz at the plate.

There were still two outs, and GI was still down two runs, when AJ Jasek singled to drive in another run. Now it was 6-5.

A throwing miscue left runners on second and third for Kelly, who started the game and threw 117 pitches in eight innings.

Line-drive to center. The center fielder came in, but the ball got down, scooted past him, and both runs scored.

Final score: Grand Island 7, Honeoye Falls-Lima 6.

"It was an amazing, amazing finish," Santorio said. "How does that happen? His father was there. There wasn't a dry eye in the place. It was storybook, like a Disney story."

"One of the moms from the team took photos of the mosh pit in the stands," said Matt Lenz. "In one of the pictures I saw my mom. In the next picture there were like five people on top of her."

Matt Lenz went home with the game ball, which sits in the family's living room next to the ones from the sectional titles. Grand Island will play in the state final four Saturday at Union-Endicott High School.

"My dad coached a lot of the kids on that team, and they all loved him, and they were going out to give him the game ball," Phil Lenz said. "It was something special that we're never going to forget."