

Top-ranked CC to play Glenn in regional tourney

By STEVE KOWALSKI
STAFF WRITER

When Brian Hicks transferred to Redford Catholic Central last fall, most everyone he passed in the hallways was a stranger.

Hicks still doesn't know most of his classmates but he has become a popular face around CC — even though he's usually wearing a catcher's mask on the baseball diamond.

"I didn't know anyone and no one knew me," said Hicks, a Garden City resident, referring to the first few months of his junior year at CC after transferring from Dearborn Fairlane Christian. "But since the season started I've gotten a little more recognition around school. A lot of people I don't even know are saying, 'When are you going to hit another home run?' I don't know what to say."

Hicks will have another chance to add to his team-leading nine home runs when the Shamrocks play in

Saturday's Class A regional at Temperance-Bedford. CC (23-3 overall) meets Westland John Glenn (15-7) at noon in a regional semifinal; Lincoln Park plays Taylor Kennedy at 10 a.m. In the other semifinal with the championship scheduled for 2 p.m.

Besides leading the Shamrocks in homers, Hicks also has the team lead with 30 RBI and is hitting .418, which is second behind Scott Kapla's .462 average.

What makes Hicks' accomplishments all the more impressive is he started the season without a hit in eight at-bats.

Hicks and current CC third baseman Eric Justice played two years on the Fairlane Christian varsity team before transferring to CC last summer. A veteran of several Little Caesars' travel teams in Garden City, Hicks had to prove himself all over again to CC coach John Salter.

"In the past I've had kids transfer in who were supposedly good

players but they didn't pan out so I've always been hesitant about getting excited," Salter said. "Indoors, Brian was hitting the ball well off the pitching machine, but then again sometimes you look good indoors and don't hit so well outside."

"He started the season 6 for eight and struck out a few times and I said, 'Oh, man, he's struggling.' But he kept telling me, 'Coach, I've hit well everywhere I played.' He must have went 10 for 14 after that and he's batted third or fourth the rest of the way."

Hicks and CC ace right-handed pitcher Scott Kapla make up one of the strongest batteries in the state.

Kapla, headed to Eastern Michigan on a baseball scholarship, is 9-1 with a 1.24 earned run average and 75 strikeouts in 67 innings. If Hicks continues his improvement, he'll also draw much attention from scouts next year.

"If I work hard I can write my own ticket, being a left-handed hitting catcher," said Hicks, who

hefted up to 6-foot-1 190 pounds over the winter months. "I've never doubted my own ability but I've been surprised with the long ball. Usually I'm an opposite field hitter but I've been pulling the ball more this year."

Recalling 1987 Classic

CC and Glenn last met in 1987 when the Shamrocks held on for a 9-8 win in a Class A district final. The Shamrocks, who went on to win the state championship, enjoyed a 9-0 lead after five innings before Chris Scheffer's three-run homer highlighted a furious Rockets comeback.

Glenn reached the Final Four the year before and Rockets coach Norm Hoenes knew the winner of the district would be the favorite to win it all.

What made the high-scoring outcome so ironic was each team had great pitching staffs. CC had senior left-hander Greg Hieger and senior

right-hander Doug Martin, each of whom now pitches in the Tigers organization; and Glenn had righties Bill Barber (who was a Division I prospect) and Clint Straub (currently with the University of Detroit-Mercy).

"It was a great game," Hoenes said. "We got to the Final Four in '86 and I said to the players, 'This is our chance. Whoever wins this district will be state champs.' Both had real good teams. We got behind early and never quite caught them."

CC is hitting .326 as a team, by far the team's best average in recent years, according to Salter. Among those hitting above .300 are seniors Dan Gusoff (.338) and Paul Kuhn (.333) and juniors Aaron Runnberger (.319) and Aaron Babicz (.300).

The Shamrocks will likely go with Kapla on the mound and No. 2 man Dan Gusoff is also capable (5-0, 2.02 ERA) should Kapla get in trouble.

The Rockets began the season with a 2-5 record but have won 11 of

their last 12. Ace pitcher Aaron Scheffer, who started 0-3, brings a 5-4 record into the game with a 1.97 ERA.

The Rockets, who are hitting .296 as a team, have a dangerous leadoff man in senior Greg Tannis (.387, 10 stolen bases) and another threat is senior John Ward (.355, 15 stolen bases).

"I think Scheffer, right now, is one of the best pitchers in the state," Hoenes said. "We just played so bad behind him (early in the season), we couldn't pick up a ground ball, and it was a waste of good pitching. If I'm going to throw my best, then I've got a pretty good shot."

Hicks, meanwhile, likes the Shamrocks' chances at the regional.

"I most definitely think we can win it," he said. "No one is carrying the club; we're all playing well and are focused. If Kap (Kapla) and Gus (Gusoff) come through, I don't think we can be beat."

Stevens

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"Actually, our race is going to be a lot closer because everybody is at pretty much the same level," he said. "The technology has come so far we're just reaching for tenths of a second."

"It's probably one of the most competitive series there is. As diverse as the cars are in make, they're very competitive in the performance aspect."

The Trans-Am race is referred to as the Motown Showdown because of the proximity of auto manufacturers and the showcasing of American muscle cars. Stevens' car is equipped with a "production-based engine identical to the one in Mustangs, but it's highly modified to produce 600 horsepower," he said.

Stevens, who will receive a degree in business administration from WMU next year, is grateful to Roush, whom he met through the Ford Thunderbird Go-Kart Club.

Stevens had won numerous titles on the Kart circuit at Flat Rock and, having proved himself there, was invited to join the Roush organization in 1984. He progressed through the ranks to become a driver in 1989.

"None of this could happen without the help of Jack Roush," he said. "This team is the No. 1 road-racing team in America for sedans. It's won 50 percent of the races (in recent years) and I feel very fortunate to be part of the best."

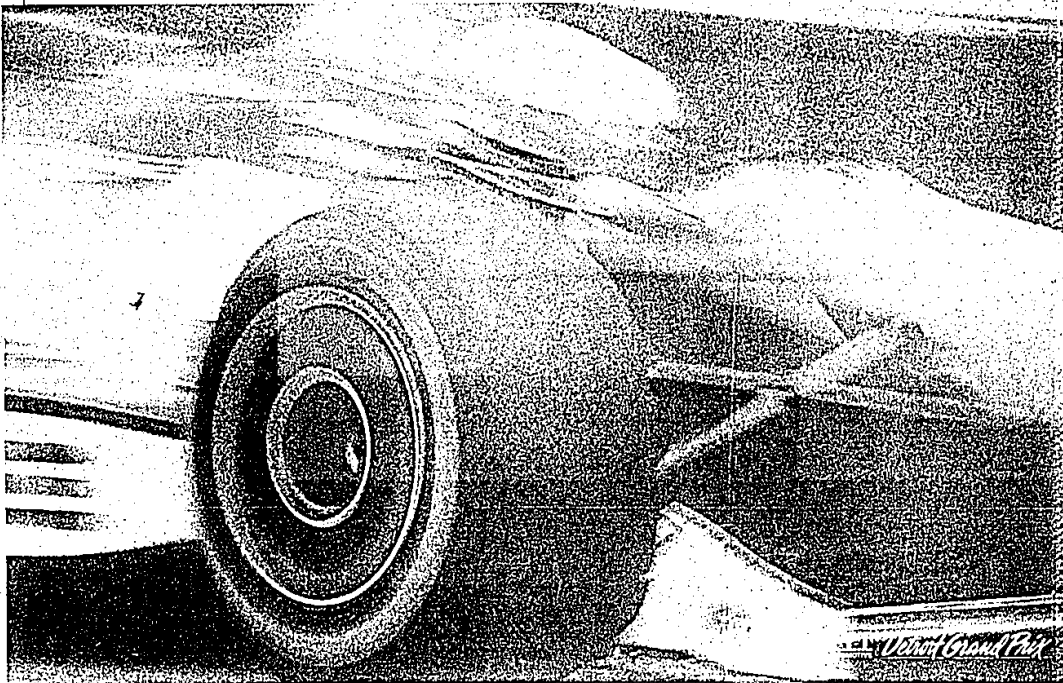
That Stevens has become a race-car driver is no surprise. His father, Jim Sr., raced Formula 5000 cars and owns a used-car dealership in Wayne.

"When I was born he was still racing, so I've always been around cars," he said. "It was sort of a natural progression."

Stevens has toured the Belle Isle course and finds a number of things he likes about it and which are different from others. Drivers call it a "green track" because no rubber has been ground into it yet.

"A few areas are quite tight and could be pretty tricky, but overall I really like the track," he said. "It's really smooth and the corners are not as abrupt. There's enough difficulty that it's going to be a challenge. Also, it's a very wide street course. There's a lot of room to pass."

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