

By DAN HAWTHORNE Sports Editor

As the 2010 baseball season came to close, one team was left standing. This week Benton Academy head baseball coach Brent Woods and senior Bucky Shipp were

Benton's Shipp and Woods earn top honors

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named the All-Herald Coach of the Year and Player of the Year in what turned out to be one of the most exciting seasons on the diamond in recent memory.

Woods had a lot of expectations coming in. With two of the top pitchers in Academy A on his staff, the Raiders were poised to win a conference title and make a strong run for a state title. Woods took them all the way to the North A semifinals.

"It's been heartbreaking at times," Woods said. "Just been a bad draw of cards. Not too many teams can lose their top players and continue to perform as strong as they were earlier in the season."

Benton has earned three straight postseason births under Woods; a second round appearance in 2008 followed by an unexpected first round exit in 2009 due to key injuries. It was a similar situation in 2010.

The Raiders were off to a hot start, winning six of their first seven games and scoring double digit runs in at least half of those victories. One of the biggest reasons for that success was senior Bucky Shipp, who in the first few weeks was batting an impressive .600.

That trend continued for the most of the season, despite the team's seven-game slump around spring break. Shipp says he wasn't too concerned and knew he would get himself and the team, back on track.

"Spencer and Daniel Pierce and I started hitting off the tees a lot more during practice," Shipp said. "I think everybody started seeing us doing that. All the younger kids would get out there before we did and there would be tees lined up around the fence. Everyone would be hitting, trying to work on everything."

Woods added that the players started to take that "hot streak" for granted because it was working so well, becoming somewhat superstitious with their hitting. The winless skid had ended with a 17-4 victory over Sharkey Issaquena, and things started to turn around for the red and gold.

Heading into his final season, Shipp was determined to be part of a season to remember. Under Woods, he would craft his skills into one of the top pitchers in Single A and become in a way, much like his coach.

"As a sophomore taking things in, I knew what Bucky was thinking on the mound," Woods said. "He was in the same situation I was in at that age. When the game was on the line, he wanted the ball in his hands."

At practice Shipp was like a sponge, soaking in as much baseball knowledge as he could. "He understood that you wanted the first pitch for a strike," Woods said. "That you wanted to get ahead and stay ahead (in the count). He knew everything that I did."

The relationship between player and coach reached a point that at times the young protégé would be shrug off pitches his coach would be calling, knowing he could throw something better that would get him out of a jam.

"About 98 percent of the time when he was on that day, we could work real good together," Woods said. "His mentality, his emotions and capabilities; I lived a lot of this through Bucky." It was obvious, not just to the player and coach, but to friends and family. Woods said that players like Shipp make it easier to coach and make it more fun to enjoy the game. The pair may always not see eye to eye on what pitches to throw in clutch situations, but Shipp understands his role on the team.

"It's kind of one of those things where he's the coach and if he says I'm going to do this, I may not think it's right but I'm going to do it," Shipp said.

Following Woods' advice, Shipp changed his swing midway through the year and still led the

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team in batting (.562), singles (31), total bases (90) and home runs (10).

"I think that proves it," Shipp said. "People should buy into what your coach is telling you to do." The ship hasn't quite sailed for the Raiders third baseman and starting pitcher. The coaches voted him the MVP of 2010 while earning Single A North All-Star honors. Shipp will be joined by Spencer Pierce and the other North All-Stars when they battle the South May 29 in Jackson. "It feels good," Shipp said. "I'm trying to not let it go to my head."

He's still working hard in the cage and throwing every day with his dad to keep up his mechanics.

"The focus he got as a player, from Benton and being voted as the MVP, that says a lot for Bucky," Woods said. "It kind of makes you step your game up a little bit because everyone knows how good you are on your team."

There will be a few familiar faces on this year's team; a handful of players from Bayou, Humphreys and Central Holmes Academies that will showcase their skills. Shipp said he isn't worried, he just wants to do his best, play hard and carry over his remarkable senior campaign into the collegiate level at Mississippi College. .

Meanwhile Woods will have to rebuild his team around a core group of players; the likes of Ryan Smith, Bo Dickerson, Joe White and youngster Jason Berry will be back for the Raiders in 2011 and look to continue the team's recent success the last three seasons.