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# SPORTS

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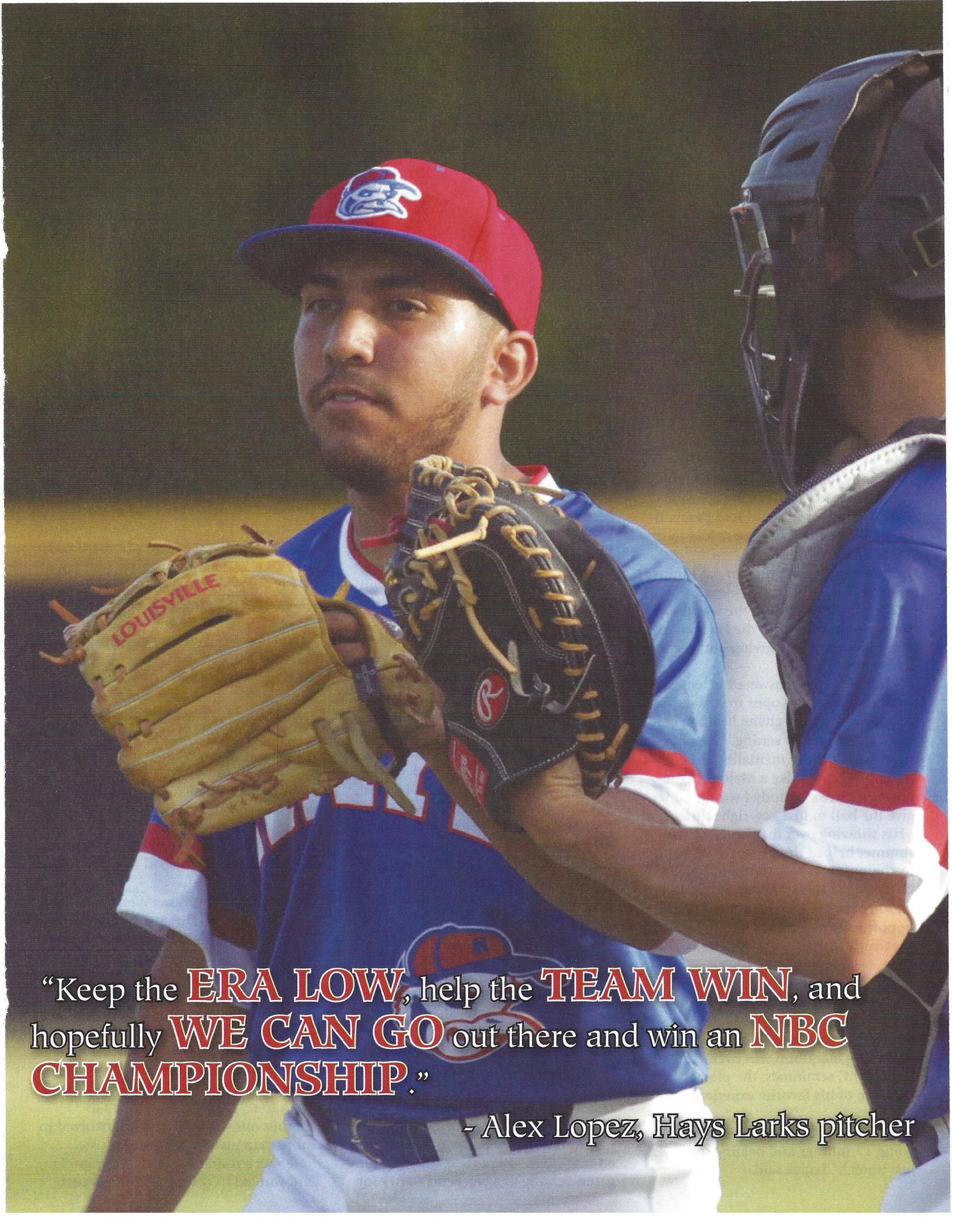
# ACE *in Hays*

ALEX LOPEZ IS ONE OF  
THE JAYHAWK'S TOP GUYS



THE HAYS DAILY NEWS

AUGUST 2017



“Keep the **ERA LOW**, help the **TEAM WIN**, and hopefully **WE CAN GO** out there and win an **NBC CHAMPIONSHIP**.”

- Alex Lopez, Hays Larks pitcher

# The Larks' Hidden Gem

By Vinny Benedetto

Overlooking Alex Lopez is understandable to some extent.

When scanning the Hays Larks' dugout, Lopez doesn't exactly ace the eye test, standing a couple inches short of six feet. A look at the roster, and Lopez's soon-to-be alma mater, Texas Wesleyan, gets buried by the likes of Oklahoma, Oklahoma State and Sam Houston State, teams that played this season in the NCAA Division I baseball tournament.

Lopez's team played in the NAIA national tournament.

In short, the right-handed starting pitcher is a small guy from a small school. Few, if any, would describe his stuff as overpowering.

"There was one day at school where I was throwing like 90 to 92," Lopez said. "That was a power day, but there wasn't many days where I felt really good, and that stuff happened."

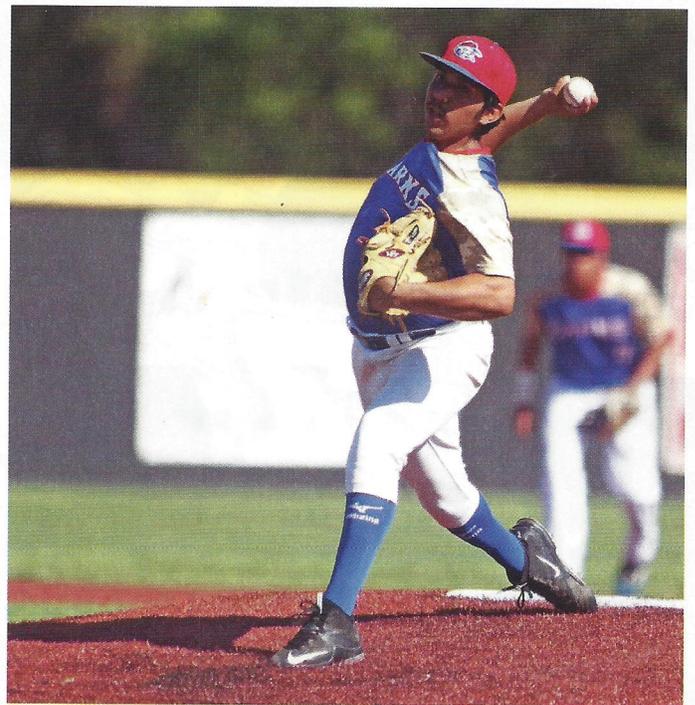
What's hard to ignore, however, is Lopez's production as a Lark.

Lopez owns a 13-2 record over his two summers in Hays. He's 5-1 with a 3.57 earned-run average through July 12 in his second summer as a Lark.

"He's a veteran. He's not going to get shook. He knows how to pitch," Larks' manager Frank Leo said. "He's a guy that's going to give you a good shot to win."

The distinction between pitching and merely throwing is important to Lopez. It's something that has helped him progress to the point where he's one of the better pitchers on a summer roster full of Division I talent.

When he got thrown into the fire as a freshman at Texas Wesleyan, Lopez said he was throwing hard and hoping it didn't get hit harder back at him.



**ABOVE:** Lopez delivers a pitch during a game last summer at Larks Park. **RIGHT:** Lopez in his second year in Hays.

"I threw 75 innings that year, and I had no idea what I was doing with anything," Lopez said.

He played summer ball in western New York that year, an experience that he said helped him substantially.

An injury shortened his sophomore season before helping the Rams primarily from the bullpen as a junior.

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That led into his first summer in Hays where he went 8-0 in the regular season.

"He knows how to pitch. There's a difference between throwing and pitching," Larks' pitching coach Keith Harper said. "Fortunately, Alex for his size, knows how to pitch and how to get outs."

For Lopez that means commanding his pitches down in the zone. Anything else can lead to trouble.

"Working the bottom of the zone with command is going to get good hitters out," Lopez said.

"If the ump is giving you called strikes around the knees, then I'm going to have a good day because I can hit that spot all day. But if you bring me up ... I don't throw hard enough to get it past most of these guys."

He relies mostly on movement, throwing a two-seam fastball and a cutter that work in opposite directions. An effective curveball has been added to his repertoire in his final summer.

The only loss he suffered in the 2016 summer season came in the championship game of the National Baseball Congress World Series, a 6-2 loss to the Santa Barbara Foresters.

Lopez gave up five runs in 3.2 innings of work.

While it didn't end up the way the Larks would've hoped, the Hays coaches don't seem to regret giving him the ball in the finale.

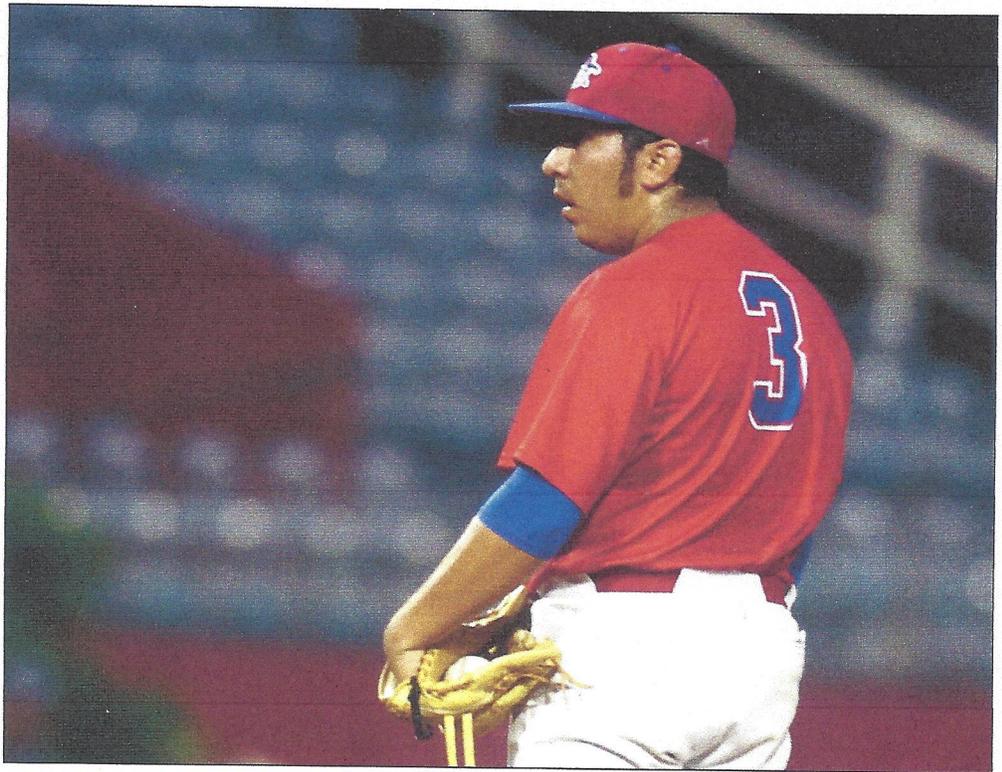
"Heart," Harper answered when asked what it was about Lopez that makes a coach comfortable giving him the ball in a championship setting. "He's got the heart. He's got the mentality. He knows he's not talented like a Major League guy, but there's nobody I would rather give the ball to in a key, tight situation."

His showing over the course of last summer helped the Larks secure a spot in championship week in 2017. Given the opportunity, Lopez would like another shot at the Forresters or have the opportunity to put his stuff up against guys with Major League Baseball experience.

"The (Kansas) Stars or the Forresters, you want the ball in those games for sure," Lopez said.

Even though Lopez didn't pitch in the 17-inning marathon win over the Stars in the NBC semifinals, the pitcher listed it as one of his favorite experiences as a Lark.

"Just playing them was cool, but then going 17 innings and beating them was just unreal," Lopez said.



Alex Lopez played a key role in the Larks' run to the NBC Championship game in 2016.

That's the kind of guy Lopez is, according to his coaches. Even when he's not on the mound, he's usually one of the easier Larks to spot between innings, whether he's rushing out to give high fives or showcasing a dance move or two for the fans.

"He's a great team guy to keep them loose and keep them in the ballgame," Leo said. "That's part of the fun in the summertime is to see these guys come together, and Alex is a good catalyst to make that happen."

Unless an independent league team comes calling or a tryout back in his home state of Texas produces interest, this summer could be the end of Lopez's competitive baseball career. If baseball isn't in the cards a year from now, the music education major plans to go to graduate school in hopes of eventually becoming a professor at a university and possibly coaching.

He's getting a head start this summer, working with promising younger pitchers like Stephen F. Austin's Tyler Starks and Colorado School of Mines' Walt Pennington.

"I think trying to do that, communicate and pass on knowledge is moreso what this summer is about rather than going out there and having the best statistical season of my career," Lopez said.

That's not to say Lopez has given up on this summer after helping Texas Wesleyan reach its conference championship game, serving as a weekend starter for

much of his final collegiate season.

"Keep the ERA low, help the team win, and hopefully we can go out there and win an NBC championship," said Lopez of his goals for the rest of the season. "That would be icing on the cake for Coach Leo for sure."

Being overlooked isn't anything new for Lopez.

He was homeschooled throughout much of his childhood and played on a cooperative team with others from similar backgrounds. Playing small schools during the spring season didn't help his recruitment out of high school.

His main exposure came from summer ball and showcases. He planned to play at Frank Phillips Junior College before realizing he would basically be repeating his academic course load from his senior year of high school.

He wound up at Texas Wesleyan after a volunteer coach lineup up a bullpen situation with the Rams' head coach. It was late in his senior year, and Lopez earned a dorm grant. An audition with the music department freed up a little more money, and Lopez was able to pursue both of his passions not far from his home in the Dallas/Fort Worth area.

While he believes he could have possibly played at a higher level, he doesn't seem to regret much, as the small campus allowed Lopez to be involved in more than just baseball and music.

He was a resident advisor, tour guide and worked in the student life depart-

ment.

"It just ended up being a really good fit for what I wanted to do," Lopez said.

"I was able to do a ton of other stuff outside of baseball and music, which was already way too much."

Lopez will also advocate for the quality of baseball in the upper tier of the NAIA, as many schools feature guys that started their careers in Division I. The biggest difference for the pitcher is the funding and coverage found at higher levels.

"NAIA gets a bad rap because we don't have the same funding these schools do. Most of them are small liberal arts private schools that don't got a ton of funding for athletics," Lopez said.

"We have guys that are freaks too."

Lopez wouldn't be considered one of those freaks by any measurable, but he's still able to do his job.

"He throws strikes and knows how to get people out. Somebody ought to give him an opportunity," Harper said. "I think they would be very happy to see how many innings he could go for them. He's a very talented kid on the mound, and he understands what he needs to do to get people out."

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