



HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS

Belen Jesuit's Rodriguez, Southridge's McCray are Miami-Dade Overall Coaches of the Year

BY ANDRE FERNANDEZ

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Building winning basketball programs isn't anything new for Gaston "Chachi" Rodriguez.

But this season at Belen Jesuit, Rodriguez exceeded even his loftiest expectations.

Rodriguez led an undersized, unheralded Wolverines' boys' basketball team that had never even made it past the second round of the playoffs to its first state championship.

Such success wasn't new for the Miami Southridge girls' track and field team.

But it had been six years since the Spartans, a seven-time state champion, had been able to celebrate one.

That changed this season as coach Erin McCray guided Southridge to its first team state title since 2017.

Both Rodriguez and McCray's accomplishments earned them the Miami Herald's Overall Coaches of the Year honors for Miami-Dade County.

Rodriguez is the Herald's winner for boys' sports while McCray wins the honor for girls' sports.

Rodriguez joins former Belen football coach Rich Stuart (2009-10) as the only other coaches at the school to win the award.

McCray is the first Southridge girls' sports coach to win the honor since former softball coach Bob Schmidt won it in 1997.

Rodriguez guided a Belen team that did not have a single player taller than 6-4 or with a major Division-I scholarship offer past the second round of the playoffs for the first time ever.

The Wolverines were just hoping to win their first district championship in 17 seasons at the start of the year.

Rodriguez, who also won state titles with Champagnat Catholic and Miami Coral Reef, became the first coach in state history to win championships at three schools.

"This team is a special group of young men led by seven amazing seniors who have done a lot to make sure everyone feels like a part of this group," Rodriguez said in March after winning the state title. "It was a beautiful thing to watch them this year and watching them enjoy it."

McCray has been building the Spartans back into a champion in recent years. While Southridge had produced numerous individual champions, it wasn't until this season that they dominated the Class 4A field, finishing with 77.5 points to finish well ahead of runner-up Lakeland George Jenkins (48 points).

Southridge won four events at state, led by Cynteria James, the Miami Herald's Girls' track Athlete of the Year, who won the 400-meter dash in 53.75 seconds. Takiyah Ferguson won the 400-meter hurdles (1:01.27) and the Spartans won both the 400- and 1,600-meter relays.



Miami Southridge's girls' track and field athletes and coaches celebrate after winning the Class 4A state championship on Saturday night at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville, Fla. Chris Boyle *Chris Boyle/Special to the Miami Herald*

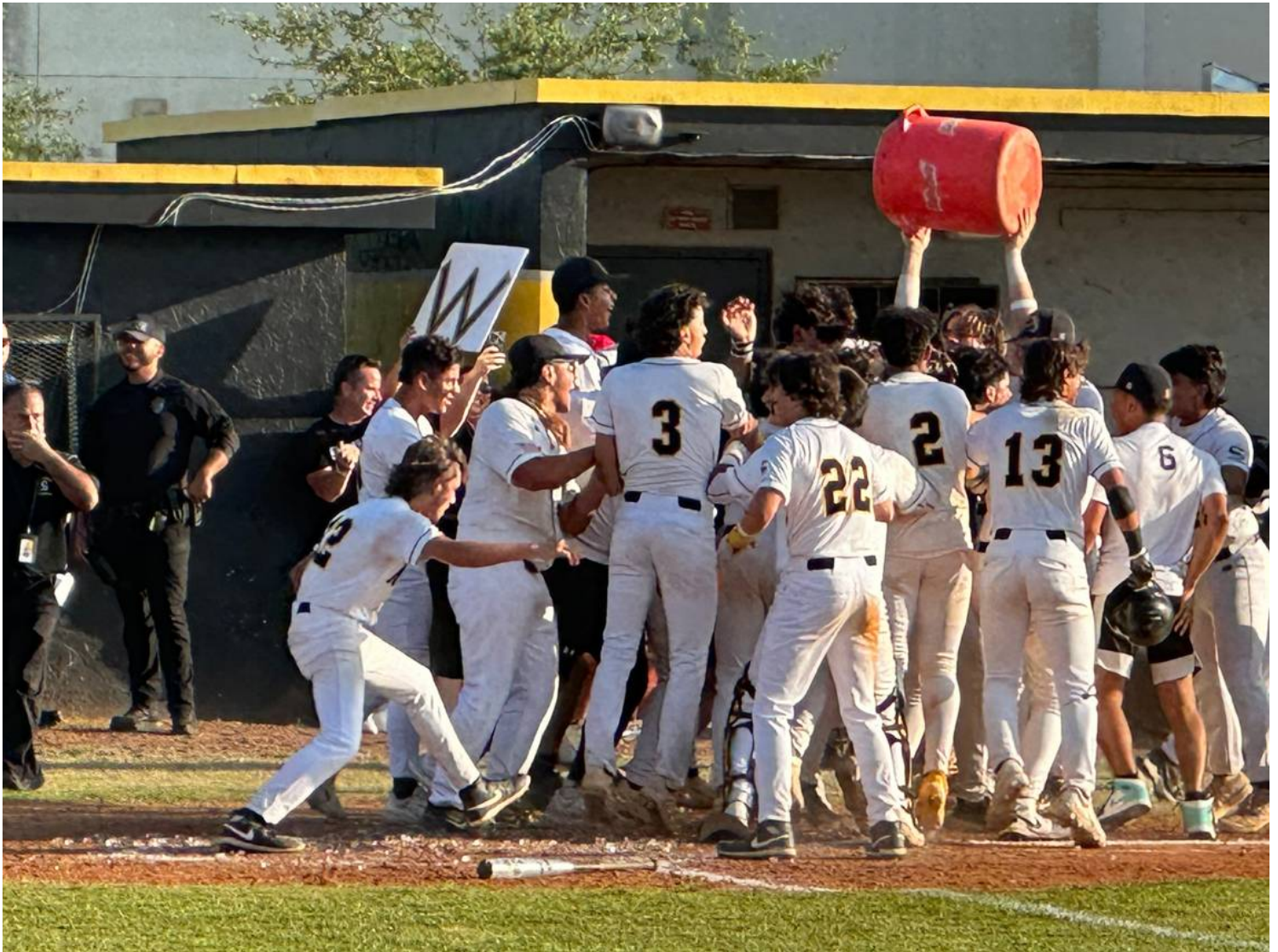
“We had a heartbreaker two years ago, and we’ve talked about the things we’ve got to do to get back,” McCray said after winning state in May. “They are dedicated, put in all the effort that they’ve got and laid everything on the line. I’m just happy, especially for my seniors to send them out as state champs.”

OTHER FINALISTS

Boys' sports

- Columbus football coach **Dave Dunn** led the Explorers to their second state championship since 2019 and second all-time. Columbus went 14-1, losing only to nationally-ranked Miami Central.

- Miami Sunset baseball coach **Julio Mendoza** led the Knights to their first ever state final four appearance. Mendoza's squad went 17-9 after going a combined 1-31 over the prior two seasons.



Miami Sunset players surround center fielder Pupi Gonzalez at home plate after his two-run walk-off home run on Friday afternoon to beat St. Brendan 7-5 in a Region 4-4A semifinal at Raul Ibanez Field. Andre Fernandez *Andre Fernandez/The Miami Herald*

- Miami Central football coach **Jube Joseph** took over for longtime coach Roland Smith and the Rockets didn't miss a beat, going undefeated and winning their fourth consecutive state title. It was the eighth overall for Central, which was also named national champs by NationalHSFB.com.
- Homestead football coach **Philip Simpson** led the Broncos to the state championship game for the first time in program history before losing in the Class

3M final to St. Thomas Aquinas. Simpson later accepted a coaching position at the University of Nebraska.

- Braddock boys' swimming and diving coach **Katia Garcia** led the Bulldogs to a state runner-up finish in Class 4A just one year after her team finished in a tie for 33rd place.
- Gulliver's **Scott Davidson** led the Raiders' boys' soccer team to a dominant run and their second state title in four seasons.

Girls' sports

- Somerset Silver Palms softball coach **Gator Rebhan** led the Stallions to their first ever appearance in the state championship game in Class 3A. Somerset, a program in its sixth season, went 29-3 including a win over previously unbeaten Coral Springs Charter in the regional final.
- Miami Country Day basketball coach **Ochiel Swaby** helped put the Spartans back on top, leading them to their eighth state title in the past 10 years.



Miami Country Day players react with the first place trophy after defeating Cardinal Mooney 54-38 during the Class 3A state Girls' basketball championship game at RP Funding Center in Lakeland, Florida, on Saturday, February 25, 2023. D.A. Varela dvarela@miamiherald.com

- Lourdes soccer coach **David Figue** guided the Bobcats back to the Class 6A state championship match through a difficult season on and off the field. Lourdes persevered after losing team captain Katy Puig, who was seriously injured in a boating accident before the season which also claimed the life of Lourdes student Lucy Fernandez.
- Miami Northwestern track and field coach **Carmen Jackson** kept the Bulls rolling with their state-record 14th consecutive state title and 19th overall - also a state record.
- Braddock cross-country coach **Alex Shaw** guided the Bulldogs to their highest finish ever, placing second at the Class 4A state meet.

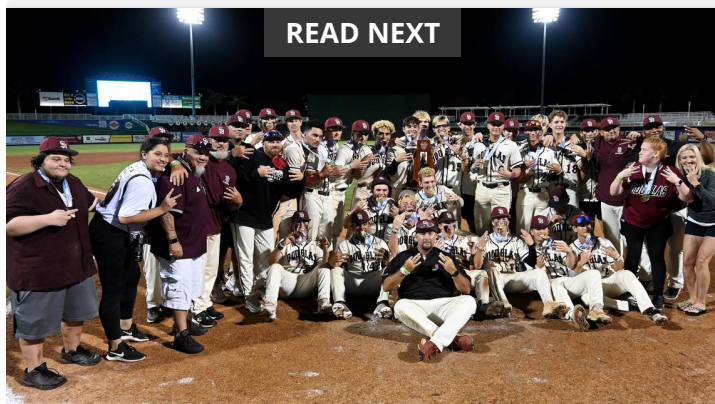
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