

Catching On

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Three years ago, Zach Hoffmann was catching and Jason Shaul was playing third base or pitching.

Then New Ulm Jr. Legion coach Dave Buegler decided to switch things up. He moved Hoffmann to first base and Shaul to catcher. Both flourished at their new positions.

So much so in fact, that Hoffmann was named the All-Journal Player of the Year in 2010 and Shaul followed suit taking top honors this year.

"I think it was the better move," New Ulm baseball coach Jay Backer said. "Zach was a good first baseman and Jason is an excellent catcher. They both went to their stronger positions.

Shaul is pleased with the progress he has made as well.

"I stepped in, was able to do it pretty well and never stopped playing there," he said. "It wasn't easy. It took a while to get used to the change. I went to a camp or two to improve and that helped."

Shaul also credits his father, Mike, for helping him make the change.

"He taught me a lot when I was young," he said. "He was always willing to help."

Backer saw that improvement in Shaul's skills behind the plate over the past two years.

"From his sophomore to his junior to his senior season, Jason improved," Backer said. "He now has a quick release. Jason always had a strong arm. He worked with coach [Ed] Tietel on his delivery and footwork and he really excelled as a catcher for us."

As good as he was behind the plate, he was even better swinging a bat over it. Shaul hit a robust .471 with seven doubles, three triples and five home runs while driving in 26 runs. Added to that he had a slugging percentage of .882 and an on-base percentage of .581. He also helped lead the Eagles to the Section 3AA championship game, where they lost to Fairmont.

"He was basically on fire from the middle of the year and into the playoffs," Backer said. "When he is on fire, no one hits the ball harder than he does."

Shaul said that the increase in his average, along with power came the old fashion way.

"I took a lot of extra batting practice," he said. "I asked my dad what I was doing wrong and he would always give me pointers. He would tell me what he thought was different about my batting stance or my swing, I would keep trying different things and would find one that worked."

Backer agreed that Shaul's improvement came with a lot of extra batting practice.

"He is a kid who loves the game - he loves to come to the ballpark or practice each day," he said. "He was a kid who would usually ask for extra batting practice. If we had a day off, Jason would ask if he could come in and hit. He is a coach's dream - he lives and breathes baseball."

And as many coaches know, the catcher is usually the leader of the team, Shaul fills that role too.

"If the guys are not doing what they need to be doing, I need to take charge and tell them what they need to be doing," said Shaul, who will play at Ridgewater College in Willmar next year. "You need to keep everyone up and positive. Being a catcher you have to be pretty tough to be able to go back there and take a beating for seven innings."



