

CHATTER

# PERSISTENCE

PAYS OFF FOR CLEMSON'S HINSON

By Bill Ballew



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enerations of children throughout the United States know *The Little Engine That Could*, a story that tells the tale of a young train engine that incorporated the values of hard work and optimism while repeating the steadfast line of, "I think I can, I think I can," to reach his goal and achieve success. Some observers have gone so far as to suggest the book serves as a metaphor for attaining the American dream.

In many ways John Hinson serves as college baseball's shining example of what can happen when employing the same resilient approach. After missing his second season at Clemson due to back surgery and opening the 2010 slate as a role player whose primary responsibility came as a late-inning designated bunter, the third baseman stayed positive and tried to take advantage of every opportunity that came his way. By the end of the campaign, the third baseman had helped guide the Tigers to the College World Series while earning the type of individual hardware typically reserved for the game's most notable performers.

"Entering the season my role on the team was a whole lot different compared to what it was at the end of the season," Hinson said. "Early on I was more of a spot player who came in late in games and did whatever the team needed me to do. Luckily I was able to show what I could do, and toward the end of the season it was almost a dream come true by being such an impact player."

The adjective "impact" might be a bit of an understatement. After an impressive second half of the regular season, Hinson took his performance to another level when Clemson headed to Plainsman Park for the Auburn Regional. In four games Hinson went 9-for-16 with three home runs, one double, five RBI, five runs scored and a .611 on-base percentage to earn MVP honors. The third baseman continued to pound pitchers in the Super Regional back in Clemson against Alabama, where he went 5-for-12 with two roundtrippers, five RBI, five runs scored, two walks and a steal in three games.

That performance led Hinson and the Tigers to Omaha for the College World Series. Clemson advanced to the semifinals before dropping a pair to rival South Carolina, the eventual champions. In four games at Rosenblatt Stadium, Hinson made the most of the moment by stroking seven hits in 16 at-bats with a triple, three RBI, three runs scored, one walk and two steals. While the Tigers returned to the Palmetto State determined to return to Nebraska, Hinson saw the dizzying array of success conclude by being named to the All-CWS team.

"It was absolutely unbelievable, the entire postseason," Hinson said. "The College World Series was almost like being a rock star. In Omaha our hotel was completely decked out in purple and orange with Clemson gear. Even the workers wore bright Clemson orange shirts every day. It was a

unique experience that I wish every player could have."

Players with less drive and determination than Hinson may not have concluded the campaign on such a positive note. After all, success had been in short supply for the infielder during his first two seasons on the Clemson campus. A product of A.C. Reynolds High School in Asheville, N.C., where Hinson established most of the school's offensive records during his four seasons as a starter, the infielder was a part-time performer with the Tigers as a freshman in 2008 while hitting .264 with a home run and 11 RBI in 87 at-bats. Clemson struggled as well, all of which led to one of the more disappointing seasons in recent memory for the hosts of Doug Kingsmore Stadium.

In 2009, he was expected to challenge for starting honors at third base before he woke up one morning with a sore back. Over the next two weeks the pain spread down his right leg, so much



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Courtesy of Clemson Sports Info

so that he could not straighten it. He initially thought he had pulled a muscle in his gluteus maximus, yet the pain failed to subside, even after he had two epidurals. Finally an MRI revealed damage in his lower back.

"When I got the news that I needed back surgery, it was heart-breaking because we were exactly one week away from opening day," Hinson said. "It was crazy. I was actually taking ground balls at the time when the trainer came down to the field and said I needed surgery. It was a shocking moment. Just like most college baseball players, I grew up loving the game and loved being on the field. To have that taken away so unexpectedly was really tough."

While the Tigers rebounded to have a better season in 2009 that included outlasting Oklahoma State in the Clemson Regional before losing at Arizona State in the Tempe Super Regional, Hinson endured hours of rehab in order to return to the field on a full-time basis. Along the way he discovered a lot about not only his passion for the sport, but also how important his approach to doing what he loved was in order to have success.

"Baseball is such a mental game," Hinson said. "The more I'm around the game, the more I realize the guys who stay positive and upbeat and truly enjoy playing baseball, those are the guys who are really successful in the end. The end is really what matters, not how you start."

That philosophy dovetailed perfectly with Hinson's redshirt sophomore season in 2010. After failing to land a starting job prior to the start of the slate, Hinson tried to remain ready any time head coach Jack Leggett looked his way. One of those occasions took place on March 13 against North Carolina State, although Hinson initially failed to accomplish what he was asked to do.

"I was called on to bunt and missed a squeeze, which is the whole reason I was put in, because Coach has confidence in my bunting," Hinson said. "To not fulfill my role and do my duty for the team was tough. I figured it was going to push my playing time back a week or so. But luckily I stayed focused and realized the game would come back to me. I wound up hitting two doubles in one inning and we came back to

win that game. I think that game really helped my confidence. I started to believe that I could be successful at Clemson. That's just another example of how baseball is full of ups and downs, but keeping the ups and downs to a minimum is really what makes a good player."

With the Tigers trailing the Wolfpack, 6-5, in the eighth inning, Hinson redeemed himself after missing the squeeze by swatting a double. He batted again later in the frame and concluded the Clemson scoring with another two-bagger that brought home three runs in what proved to be a 12-6 victory. A day later the Tigers trailed again by a 6-5 margin when Hinson hit a one-out single in the eighth and later scored the tying run in a 7-6 triumph.

More success followed shortly thereafter. In Clemson's next game, on March 16 at Charlotte, Hinson came off the bench with the Tigers trailing 8-7. With two outs, the infielder responded with a three-run pinch-hit homer to give his team a 10-8 lead.

In April, Hinson began to appear more often in the starting lineup and went 5-for-8 with a pair of home runs and eight RBI during a two-game series against Georgia. The following weekend at Duke, Hinson made three starts and responded with eight hits in 16 at-bats while posting three doubles and four RBI. That set the stage for his biggest day of the regular season, at home versus USC Upstate on April 21. Though mired in an 0-for-14 slump prior to the game, Hinson went 5-for-6 with three home runs and seven RBI. He hit a solo shot in the second inning, a three-run blast in the third and another three-run dinger in the sixth to become the 13th player in school history to achieve the trifecta in a single outing.

"John did a great job of taking advantage of the opportunities he was given, which was true with many of our young players last season," Leggett said. "He worked hard and remained ready to contribute whenever we called on him. His performance is a testament to what can happen when a player approaches the game with the right attitude."

Yet putting together strong performances during regular-season games is a far cry from the pressure-packed situations found in post-season play. Hinson, however, said that was not necessarily the case. He noted that after the Tigers had worked so hard to reach the NCAA Regionals, the contests in Auburn and then later in Clemson and Omaha felt more like a reward than a strenuous challenge. His performance reflected that attitude at Auburn. In addition to hitting at a .563 clip in the four games, Hinson made several dazzling stops at third base and did not commit an error in nine chances at the hot corner.

"Being more of an every day player and showing up to the field in the mindset that I was playing and being confident, that really helped," Hinson said. "The fact that we got to go to Auburn was exciting because we knew that atmosphere was going to be intense and wild. The way their stadium is set up, their stands are right on top of the field. They don't seat as many (fans) as some places do, but it gets extremely loud there. Going into that atmosphere was fun. The entire postseason was fun because we had been fighting all season to get there. We were able to relax and have fun and wound up playing our best baseball of the season."

The Tigers took three of four games at Auburn, including two of three versus the hosts, before dropping the first outing versus Alabama in the Super Regional. Clemson rebounded from that setback to sweep the final two contests against the Crimson Tide to advance to the College World Series. The Tigers jumped out to a great start in Omaha by beating Arizona State, 6-3, and Oklahoma, 6-4, before falling in two hard-fought contests to the Gamecocks.

"Baseball is really a roller-coaster ride," Hinson said. "You can go through a week where you feel really good and comfortable at the plate. Then you'll go through a couple of games where you feel like you're hitting from the wrong side of the plate. It's like you're lost up there. During the ACC Tournament, I didn't feel comfortable at the plate. My game plan was a little bit different than it had been and it didn't pay off for me. So going into the regional in

Auburn, I tried going up there with a different mental approach for every at-bat. Luckily it started paying off in Auburn. It was kind of like taking every pitch for what it was worth and living in the moment."

In his 11 post-season games, Hinson was the tournament's most consistent player, going 21-for-44 (.477) with five home runs, a double, one triple, 13 RBI, 13 runs scored, an .886 slugging percentage, four walks, a .531 on-base percentage and three stolen bases. His 21 hits established the school record for a single NCAA Tournament.

"Omaha went by faster than a flashing light," Hinson said. "Every week when I sit back and think about the great experience of playing in Omaha, it means that much more to me. You can't grasp the situation while you're playing in Omaha because you're so focused on playing your next game and the mental approach to playing. But when you take it all in after you head home, you realize how special the experience really was."

"What really hit home for me is that this is the biggest stage for college baseball. When we were playing South Carolina, that was our Final Four. We could smell the championship. Everything we had worked so hard for was paying off while we had the chance to play in front of 22,000 people. And even though the ESPN cameras were there and so many people were focused on us, it was still the same game we were playing when we were eight years old."

Having started the season as a reserve, Hinson concluded the campaign with incredible numbers, including a .351 batting average with nine doubles, 17 home runs and 75 RBI. In addition to receiving several individual honors, his performance also was noticed by the professional ranks. Drafted by Philadelphia in the 40th round out of high school, as a draft-eligible sophomore Hinson was selected once again by the Phillies in June, this time in the 13th round.

Speculation suggested that Hinson might use the momentum he had generated since mid-March by continuing his baseball pursuits while playing for pay. Instead, he took some time to clear his mind while returning for the second straight summer to the Cape Cod League. He returned home to Asheville in August and spoke at length with his parents, who had been in Omaha for every pitch that involved the Tigers. Though tempted, Hinson decided the grass wasn't necessarily greener on the other side of the fence, at least as far as the spring of 2011 was concerned.

"Of course, it's everybody's dream to play professional baseball, but after putting everything down on the table and trying to decide what was best, I really believe we have a chance to win a national championship," Hinson said. "I think our team is going to be just as strong as it was last year if not better. We're looking really good this fall, and I have a lot of high expectations for the spring. To be a part of that would be absolutely unbelievable. Clemson has never won a national championship despite going to Omaha several times. (Outfielder Jeff) Schaus coming back really helps, Coach Leggett is a good coach, and the atmosphere at Clemson is unbelievable. It's just a great atmosphere to play college baseball."

Hinson is not shy about what he hopes the upcoming campaign will bring. He had the privilege of playing in the final College World Series at Rosenblatt Stadium and a return to Omaha for the Tigers in 2011 would mean participating in the first CWS at the new ballpark. Those bookends would serve as perfect complements to an incredible story of a college student-athlete who made the most of his opportunities with his "I think I can" approach.

"I feel really confident now," Hinson said. "I feel like the people I'm playing with and practicing with every single day are confident as well. We push each other to the limit every day in order to work harder. I'm glad I came back to Clemson and I'm thankful for the opportunity. I've been through the ups and downs, and nothing has ever come easy."

I know this season isn't going to be easy, but I'm ready for that and so is this team. We're looking forward to it, that's for sure."