

2003 OUTLOOK

NINE STARTERS LEAD AN EXPERIENCED WSU BASEBALL TEAM

Optimism around the Washington State baseball program is on the rise in 2003, thanks to the return of nine starters and the addition of several highly regarded freshmen and transfers. The Cougars return 21 letterwinners, including seven position starters and two starting pitchers from last year's club.

Third year head coach Tim Mooney isn't predicting championships just yet, but he firmly believes the upcoming season for WSU will be an improvement over recent campaigns.

Still, Mooney confesses, the Cougars will be as good as its defense and pitching. Last year WSU hit .308 as a team (.307 in Pacific-10 play), to rank fourth in the league, but the pitching and defense didn't produce comparable numbers.

"We have good experience with our position players," offers Mooney. "I also like the mixture we have among our younger players like freshmen Jay Miller and Dustin Realini and sophomores Derek Bruce and Grant Richardson. "They will give us something to build on for years to come.

"I think we will go as our pitching staff goes," adds Mooney. "I do think we have some young players, notably Matt Ircandia, Greg Goetz and Karl Mehlholm, who are going to be very good. How fast their learning curve is in conference will determine how they do and we do."

Defense is a key, according to Mooney, and an area where WSU must improve.

"We need to be a better defensive team than a year ago," says the WSU coach. "I think it will help with Jeff LaRue moving from third to second, where he can see the ball a little longer. Realini and Bruce Jacobson will solidify us defensively at third."

What Mooney wants is a consistent defensive effort. "Defense is there every day, so I think we will look at who gives us solid defense day in and day out," he offers. "Last year our fielding percentage was pretty good, but the walks, hit batters and some untimely errors hurt us. Defensively we need to make the play when we need to make it. That will help our pitching staff as much as anything."

While senior Brandon Hundt and sophomore Bryce Chamberlin lead the returning mound staff, Mooney will be looking at several others to take over at least two of the starting roles. Among the candidates are Goetz, Ircandia and Mehlholm, plus transfer Aaron MacKenzie, senior Tony Banaszak and junior Garrett Alwert. Banaszak was a starter two years ago who missed last season while recovering from elbow surgery. Alwert had 10 starts and threw 61.1 innings last year, but will be a late participant this year while he recovers from surgery in the fall.

Hundt is Mooney's ace in the hole. Last year the right hander won six games, notched three saves and led the team with 21 trips to the mound, 15 as a starter. What Mooney hopes to do is use Hundt as a closer, providing of course others are able to step up to an effective starting role.

"If we can get four, five or six innings from our starters, then a couple of solid relief innings from the middle inning pitchers, we can turn the game over to Hundt, or maybe one of the others," says Mooney. "If we are having trouble, we can start him, or maybe in rare occasions, get a key inning from him early in a series and still get solid innings from him in game three."

WSU's outfield should be one of the team's strengths this year, with last year's top hitter senior Justin Hart (.370) back, along with juniors Collin Henderson (.297) and Jeremy Farrar. Joining them will be freshman Jay Miller, junior transfer Chad Spellman and the expected centerfield starter Zapper McGrath, also a junior. McGrath replaces three-year starter Evan Hecker.

"The outfield this year is very strong," says Mooney. "Our outfield depth will be the strength of the team."

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The crew at first base for WSU is experienced and deep, with Wes Falkenborg, Steve Mortimer and Grant Richardson all returning veterans. Falkenborg's bat, he hit .306 last year, will be in the lineup, either as a first baseman or designated hitter. Mooney calls Mortimer, who hit .304 last season, one of the best defensive first sackers in the league, while Richardson (.245), a sophomore, brings power to the lineup.

"One of our pluses is our ability to go with either a right or left handed hitter at first," says Mooney.

LaRue, senior, also had a hot bat for WSU last spring, but is now at second rather than the hot corner. "I think he will be better at second because he is farther from the ball and has the time to react," said Mooney. Last year LaRue led the team in total bases (119), slugging percentage (.598), multiple-hit games (24), hits (73) and at-bats (199) and was second in RBI (40), doubles (16) and home runs (10).

The Cougars also return their starting shortstop from last season, sophomore Derek Bruce. As a rookie, Bruce led the team with 11 home runs, drove home 35 runs and hit .260.

"Derek Bruce is making himself into a better shortstop," Mooney says. "He is better than he was last year. He has the power normally associated with a third baseman and can also play second. Derek doesn't get cheated when he swings."

With LaRue vacating the third base spot, Mooney will look to freshman Dustin Realini and senior veteran Bruce Jacobsen (.289) for a more consistent defensive effort.

"We have a battle between Realini and Jacobsen," according to Mooney. "We like Realini because he is probably a little more agile defensively. He is a freshman, so we have to expect at times he will struggle a little, just as Bruce did last year at short."

WSU is also experienced behind the plate with last year's top two backstops returning, senior starter Jon Baeder (.282) and junior Brandon Reddinger.

What Mooney is looking for behind the plate is a little more offensive production from the catcher position. "We are very strong defensively, but need some offense at that position," he says. "We would like that spot to push the .300 mark at the plate and drive in 25-30 runs. If we have to pinch hit some times to do that, we may go in that direction because we will always have a solid receiver to bring in after pinch hitting."

WSU's 2003 schedule includes home contests with Stanford, Arizona, Washington and UCLA in Pacific-10 Conference action. Lewis-Clark State makes one appearance at Bailey-Brayton Field, as does Gonzaga. Non-conference foe Sacramento State also makes a late-season trip to Pullman.

Included in the early season slate will be trips to Pacific, California State-Long Beach, San Jose and California-Irvine, all for three-game sets. WSU also will participate in this year's Banana Belt Tournament hosted by the LCSC Warriors. BYU, Portland and Gonzaga join WSU at the BBT. The Cougars will also meet Oregon State in a two-game series at Kennewick and take on the Portland Pilots in a pair of games at Portland.

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WSU'S TIM MOONEY TALKS COUGAR BASEBALL . . .

OUTFIELD:

"The outfield this year is very strong. Our outfield depth will be the strength of the team. Getting Jeremy Farrar back is a big plus (injured last year). He gives us offense, maturity and has been through the wars and isn't intimidated. He also gives us offense. Collin Henderson (football wide receiver) came out last year for the first time since high school and this year will be nothing but better. Jay Miller is fundamentally our best hitter. We also have Justin Hart back, who led the team in hitting last season. Chad Spellman and Zapper McGrath in center give us a lot of depth and the ability to mix and match to what we need."

CATCHERS:

Jon Baeder and Brandon Reddinger are the two we will go with behind the plate. We are very strong defensively, but need some offense at that position. We would like that spot to push the .300 mark at the plate and drive in 25-30 runs. If we have to pinch hit some times to do that, we may go in that direction. Somehow we need to find a way to get the offensive production we need. Defensively they are two of the best in the conference."

FIRST BASE:

"We have Steve Mortimer and Grant Richardson ready for duty at first. Mortimer is by far our best defensive first baseman, but he needs to find a way to get hits. He might be the best defensive first baseman in the conference. We need him to hit. We have the left-right match up if we need to go that way. Shawn Evenhus is also ready, but we might red-shirt him because we want to use him when he can get 150 at-bats during the season. With Mortimer (senior), Richardson (sophomore) plus Wes Falkenborg (senior and also a designated hitter), he can't get that many at-bats this year."

SECOND BASE:

"Jeff LaRue is a very good bat (team's number two hitter last year at .367) who has moved from third to second. I think he will be better at second than third because he is farther from the ball and has the time to react. The more time he has to read a hop, the better he plays the ball. He has been good transferring the double play, which has not been a problem for him. Behind Jeff we have Jonathan Fender. He is a singles hitter who can also pitch, which makes him very valuable when we go to the 25-man roster. He can back up at second base and give us an inning on the mound. Robert Stahlke is really good off the bench as a pinch hitter, so he can also give us backup duty and great pinch hitting capabilities."

SHORTSTOP:

"Derek Bruce is making himself into a better shortstop. He is better than he was last year. He has the power normally associated with a third baseman and can also play second. Derek doesn't get cheated when he swings. He puts a good swing on the ball. If you make a mistake pitching to him, he will make it hurt. Jamin Svendsen will be behind him and also can give us some relief innings on the mound. He is probably a middle inning pitcher. You know when he goes to the mound he will throw strikes."

THIRD BASE:

"We have a battle between Dustin Realini and Bruce Jacobsen. We like Realini because he is probably a little more agile defensively. He is a freshman, so we have to expect at times he will struggle a little. I also like Jacobsen, even though he might not be quite as mobile defensively, because he has been around the conference once and brings maturity."

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PITCHING:

“Greg Goetz (freshman) has a very high ceiling. He can be a Friday night pitcher in the Pac-10. He is a two-pitch guy (fastball and very good curve) who is starting to develop the change-up. To be a starter you need three pitches. He is, however, a freshman, so we don't know yet about his learning curve. Karl Majlholm is another freshman who is a very capable pitcher. How fast they develop will be important. What they can do as starters tells us what we can do with Brandon Hundt. We know Brandon is a proven pitcher. He can start or be a short relief pitcher. If we can get to the late innings with our depth, I feel great turning the ball over to Hundt. If not, then we may have to move him to a starting role. Bryce Chamberlin became a starter late in the conference season last year as a freshman and we expect him to pitch very well this year. Aaron MacKenzie is a multiple pitch guy who is big and strong. Tony Banaszak is coming off Tommy John (elbow) surgery and from what I have seen in the pen right now, he is very good, 100 percent healthy. There is no reason he can't start. He has had 18 months of recovery. He is better than he was two years ago. Matt Ircandia is another pitcher who could step up and maybe give us a mid-week starter. Billy Gorrell has the stuff to be an outstanding short relief pitcher and he is another pitcher who has been through the Pac-10 wars. Brett Beetham needs to be a spot pitcher who can come in and get two right handers out. That is his job right now. James Freeman has developed his change and he can be the one to come in and get a lefty out. Freeman also could be a middle inning guy because he can go three innings. We will shorten up on the length of Nick Kenyon's outings. We have tried to go too long (innings) with him. With this staff, we don't need to ask him to give us a lot of innings each time out.”