

BASEBALL

Rams making headway as legit contenders in Division II baseball

BY CRAIG T. GREENLEE
FOR THE CHRONICLE

The fruits of victory typically produce sky-high expectations. For teams with national championship aspirations, it comes with the territory. Coming off a history-making baseball season in which it fell two wins short of advancing to the Division II College World Series, Winston-Salem State wants more.

Entering postseason play, the Rams were ranked 21st in the national polls and fourth in the Atlantic Region. Their non-conference mark of 27-14 bolstered their status as viable regional contenders.

"This program has reached a point where it's now recognized as a legitimate (regional) contender year in and year out," said WSSU Coach Kevin Ritsche, whose team recorded a best-ever record of 42-15. "With the showing we had from this season, we have the mindset that we can win against the very best.



Ritsche

"Talent is vital for winning, but it will only take you so far. It's more important to have a group of guys who are committed to the program and committed to each other. That's the one trait that all the top contending teams have."

Since baseball's return to WSSU in 2010, Ritsche has a winning percentage of .661 (182-93) and the Rams have won five straight CIAA Tournament titles and made the same number of trips to the NCAA playoffs. At this year's Atlantic Regionals, WSSU won its first two games convincingly, but lost in heart-breaking fashion to the region's top seeds - 2-1 to Mercyhurst (No.1) and 6-5 to second-seeded

Millersville.

"Each year, we've taken baby steps and we're coming closer to achieving our goal," Ritsche said. "We're in the ninth inning against Mercyhurst and all we needed was one hit to score a run which might have changed the way things turned out."

Even though the Rams lost six seniors, including CIAA MVP Connor Andrus, the roster is far from depleted. The batting order for next season figures to be just as formidable as it was this spring.

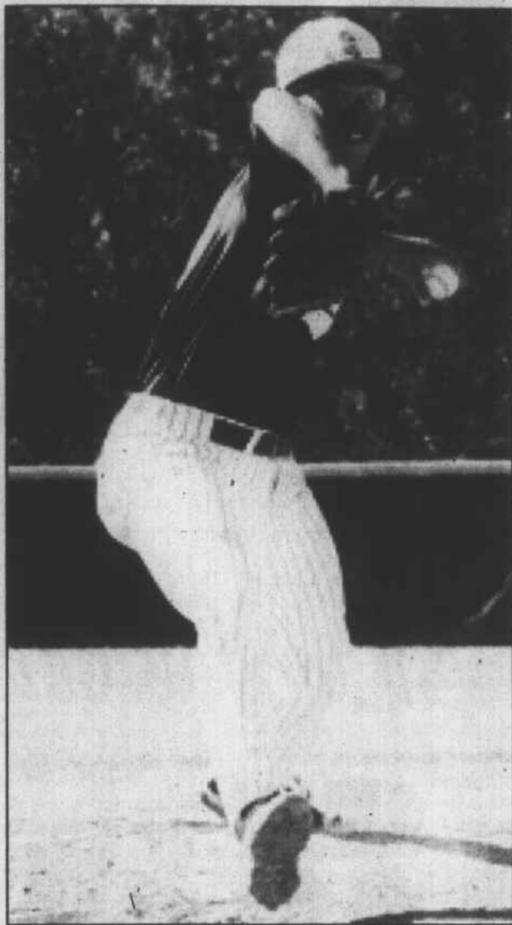
Led by Atlantic All-Regional pick Gavin Culler (.367 with 27 RBIs and 29 stolen bases), Winston-Salem State has four returnees who finished the season with batting averages over .300. Alex Grubb led the team in homers (7) and Dylan Dombrowskas had a team-high 40 RBIs.

Rams pitching won't take a back seat. Even with the loss of senior ace Aaron Hatch (8-2), there's ample depth with the return of Sam Burton, Jordan Carlton and Tyler Scarse in the

starting rotation.

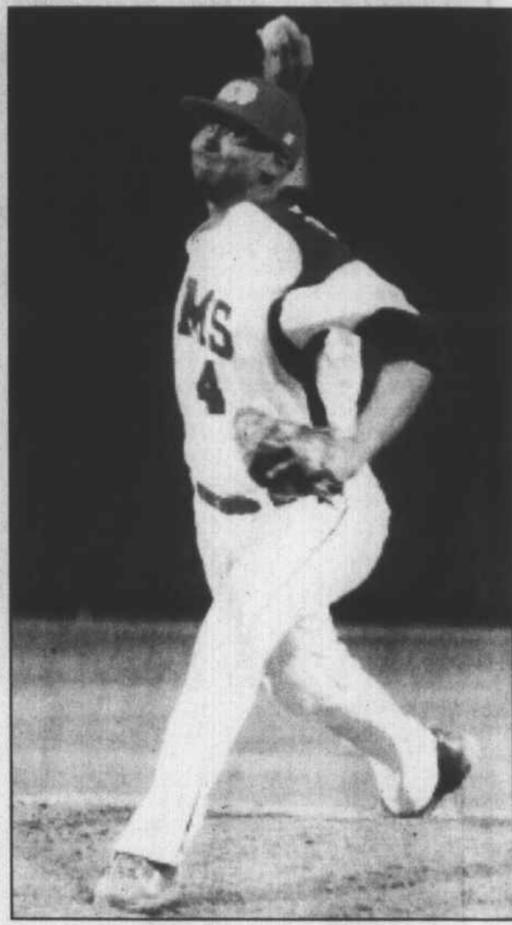
Eric Corlette (6-2) performed well in his dual roles as starter and reliever. Devin McLemore (5-2) and Jordan Cummings (6-4) picked up three saves apiece during the season and firmly established themselves as battle-tested veterans coming out of the bullpen.

McLemore, a right-hander, showcased his mound versatility in the playoffs. Carlton was unavailable for starting duty because of arm problems that required season-ending surgery. McLemore turned in a solid outing for 5.2 innings, but had to leave when he felt pain in the elbow of his throwing arm.



Photos by Craig T. Greenlee

WSSU recruit Marcus McKoy pitched a no-hitter this past season at Calvary Baptist Day School in Winston-Salem.



Jordan Cummings delivered as the Rams primary closer in 2015.

Cummings solidified his reputation as the Rams' designated closer with three strong performances in the postseason. Ritsche called on Cummings to squash potential rallies and he responded as expected.

"Jordan Cummings is our go-to guy," said Ritsche. "During the course of a game, we try to manage our pitchers so that in those final innings, we can hand the ball to him to finish the game. We put him in some very tight spots in the regionals and he handled it all very well. He loves and lives for those situations. That's a huge plus. That's the kind of mentality you want to have in your main closer."

As the Rams continue

to build, they're getting more looks from former Division I players along an increased number of upper-echelon players at the high school and junior college level. "When you're developing as we are, recruiting tends to become a little easier," said Ritsche. "It puts us in the position where we can be more selective. Your program lives or dies based on the type of players you bring in."

Here's a quick summary regarding four of the Rams top signees for this year:

Jamison Nagle, a 6-foot-2, 225 pounds catcher, will vie for playing time to replace the departed Andrus. At Surry Community College, Nagle

was the top hitter at .333. During the latter part of the season, his role was reduced to being a designated hitter because of arm problems caused by a torn labrum. Nagle had surgery in May and is expected to be ready to go when drills begin at the start of the next school year.

The Rams signed two players who helped propel their team - Catawba Community College - to this year's Junior College World Series. Ivan Acuna is a sure-handed shortstop who hit .345 and drove in 31 runs. Right-hander Justin Norton (7-2, 2.68 ERA) pitched 90.2 innings with 64 strikeouts and 22 walks. Catawba's Redhawks were ranked 9th

in the NJCAA Division II national poll.

Marcus McKoy is a 6-foot-3, 205 pounds left-hander from Calvary Baptist Day School in Winston-Salem. This spring, he threw a no-hitter against the defending Class 1-A independent school state champ Fayetteville Christian Academy. For the season, McKoy, an All-State pick, pitched 47 innings and had 75 strikeouts with an ERA of 2.32.

"We'll continue to build and keep things rolling," said Ritsche. "And we'll tweak a few things here and there. But for the most part, nothing is broken, so there's no need to fix anything."

Local athletes come out to support cancer survivor

Student athlete from Reagan, cleared to return to the field

BY TEVIN STINSON
THE CHRONICLE

On Monday, May 18, Reagan student-athlete Savion Littlejohn got the news he had been waiting to hear since late last year: He is officially cancer free.

"It was just a minor setback," Savion said. "I knew I would come back better than ever. I'm almost there."

Although he is cancer free, Savion's medical bills are still extremely high. To help lighten the financial load, Chase Vaden, a former teammate of Savion's, organized the Pray For Sac 7-on-7 tournament.

The tournament was held on Saturday, May 30, at Reagan High School and featured both high school and college players. Although he expected a big turnout in the high school bracket, Vaden said he was surprised by the number college athletes that came out to support the event.

"I had a feeling we were going to struggle getting teams in the college bracket," Vaden said. "But we ended up having more teams in the college bracket than in the high school bracket."

In the high school bracket, the team made up of Reagan athletes defeated a talented team made up of athletes from East Forsyth for the championship. In the college bracket, "The Ones" who were made up of players from Guilford College, defeated "The Canes."

Savion, who plays linebacker for Reagan said, he was pleased with how his team played even though they were missing some key players.

"We were missing a few players, but we still played

well," said Savion. "A few of our players were at camps."

Admission to the tournament was \$5. According to Vaden, with T-shirt sales, and money from concessions, the event raised over \$2,500.

"We will have a more accurate amount at the after party Wednesday," Vaden said. "We didn't have a goal going in, we just wanted to help Savion as much as possible."

Brandon Jackson of Winston-Salem competed in the college bracket and said he enjoyed the event because it was for a good cause still competitive at the same time.

"I play in other flag leagues, and when I heard about this, I had to come out," Jackson said. "I really wanted to come out and show my support for Savion."

Although he didn't get a chance to play in the tournament, his grandfather Charlie Garvin said that football is Savion's heart and he is determined to make it back on the field.

"He's been working with a personal trainer for two weeks now," Garvin said. He is determined to run out on



Photo by Tevin Stinson

Cancer survivor Savion Littlejohn helped coach his teammates to victory during the tournament. He has no doubt in his mind he will be back on the field for the first game of the season when the Raiders face the Glenn Bobcats.

the field with his team the first game of the season."

According to doctors by the time the season starts, Savion will be around 80 percent. Garvin believes that after all his grandson has been through, there's no doubt he will be back on the field in August.

"After beating cancer, getting back on the football field should be easy," Garvin said. "I can't wait to see him run on the field that first game. It's going to be amazing."

WSSU awards intramural champions at Carl H. Russell, Sr. Center

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Derrick Smith and Dorothy Eaton from the Office of Business and Auxiliary Services at Winston-Salem State University presented basketball champions ages 15 and up at the Carl Russell Center with WSSU t-shirts and backpacks, as a part of a community service to inspire future college students to attend a HBCU college or university. "I thank God for people like Derrick, who was coached by Brian Leak when he was a young basketball player at the center. He encouraged the champions at the center to always give back to your community. We are also thankful for the 150 young people who participated in the league but our hats come off to WSSU," said Center supervisor Ben Piggott.

