

Marty Miller has nurtured Norfolk State baseball just like a parent raising a child.

There have been some major growing pains along the way. But the end product is what the coach had envisioned when he took over the program 18 years ago.

At this point, it's obvious that the coach's labors haven't been in vain. The NSU baseball program has reached adulthood, blossoming into one of the top Division II programs in the nation. Under Miller's guidance, Spartans' baseball has yielded some pretty fair results. For example:

- Made three straight NCAA Division II playoff appearances ('88, '89, '90);
- Averaging 32.5 wins a season since moving to Division II in '85;
- Nationally ranked in Division II for the last three years;
- From '80-'89, had nine players sign professional baseball contracts.
- Outfielder Terry Bradshaw, All-American second-baseman Chris Mitchell, and pitching ace Washington Wilkerson (members of the '90 team) are viewed as top-notch prospects who are likely to be chosen in this year's baseball draft.

"It takes time to develop a good program," confesses Miller, who played at NSU in the mid-60s and was an NCAA All-America. "To compete at the top level, you need to be strong in several areas. It's not always easy getting all of the people you need to win consistently every year."

This season, however, Norfolk came within a base hit of taking the next step to national prominence -- a berth in the Division II College World Series.

Going into the first round of the playoffs, Norfolk (36-16) was ranked 11th nationally. The Spartans demonstrated they were for real, defeating No. 4 ranked Indiana (Pa.), 16-15.

But on the next day, they dropped two straight in a best two-of-three series vs. Philadelphia Textiles. The second loss to Philly was heart-wrenching. The Spartans blew a 7-2 lead and fell 8-7 in 13 innings. That loss knocked them out of a chance to go to the College World Series in Montgomery, Ala.

"We thought this would be the year for us to make it to the series," says Miller. "We had some breakdowns that allowed them to get back in the game and they won in extra innings. It was disappointing to lose the way we did. But the main thing is that now our players know that they are just as good as any Division II club in the country. Since we have the nucleus of our team coming back, we'll use that as extra motivation for next season."

Miller points to four critical areas that has enabled Norfolk State baseball to rise to its current level:

- Full support of the school's administration in allowing the program to fully develop;

- More players with Division I talent are opting to play for the Green & Gold;
- A beefed up schedule -- NSU's slate is comprised mainly of the better Division I teams and the nationally ranked Division II programs;
- Every year, a host of pro scouts regularly attend Norfolk's games.

"I can't say enough about the kind of support the administration has given me," said Miller, who is also the school's interim financial aid director.

"The institution has allowed me to grow as a coach and administrator. They've allowed me to grow as much as I want to. That's important for someone like me who is very competitive."

The schedule and the interest of pro scouts serve as strong incentives for the

colleges at the Division II level. Miller, who took over a program at NSU that "was just there and not doing very much", feels that more black schools will restore their programs over the next few years.

Still, the coach cautions anyone starting a program to be prepared to put themselves totally into their program. He recalls his rookie season as coach in '73 when his troops finished 0-11. It was a time when Miller himself, did many of the things people take for granted -- with his own resources. Things like washing the team uniforms, marking the field, and even cutting the infield grass with his own lawnmower.

"If a person starting up a program isn't totally committed," he stresses, "he won't make it. There are just too many

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top black high school baseball players to sign up with NSU, the coach says. "We play all the top teams that will play us," Miller notes. "Our people like playing at that level because it helps them raise their level of play. And because we're getting more attention from the pro scouts, the word is out that you can go to a black school, play baseball and get national exposure."

In the past, when you think of black college baseball, the tendency is to focus on Division I -- the Florida A&Ms, Southern, and Jackson States. But that's started to change with what's been happening in Spartanland.

The rise of Norfolk State baseball has helped to revive the sport at black

obstacles in the way. When I started out, I wasn't prepared for that first year when we didn't win a game. It was frustrating, because we lost several of those games by one run. When you don't win, it tends to knock you down."

In other words, those schools who are bringing baseball back should understand that they will have to take their lumps as part of the restoration process.

But for those schools who have programs, Miller feels that the level of competition from Division II black schools is much improved over the last five years. He goes as far as saying that the gap between the good teams and the average teams is closing faster than most would expect.

From a black college perspective, the NSU mentor feels that's a major plus for black college baseball, particularly at the Division II level. "I'm getting a multitude of inquiries from kids who want to play at Norfolk," the coach said. "These are kids who have the tools to play for Division I programs."

Miller feels that this trend that could very well be in the very early stages, primarily because there is still the perception that black college baseball goes largely unnoticed and underpublicized, if at all.

"In the past, there were those gifted



Photo Courtesy of Norfolk State University

high school players who wanted to attend a black school," the coach explained. "But because most of those schools didn't even have a program or had programs that weren't very competitive, they decided to attend school elsewhere."

"But the success our teams has started to turn that around. The players know they can get the competition and exposure at any of the better Division I and Division II programs. But at a black school, they realize that we are concerned about their welfare, concerned about what they do away from the playing field."

The fan support at Norfolk State has also reached new heights. In some circles, that may be viewed as surprising, considering that baseball is a non-revenue sport. At black colleges, the major emphasis is on football and basketball because those sports produce revenue.

"I believe more black schools will bring baseball back because they'll find that they can attract more students to their campuses," Miller says. "That's what has happened at Norfolk and I'm very happy about that."

"You get a different kind of clientele (with baseball) because there are people who are interested in baseball who will support your program. In many cases, those same people aren't interested in football or basketball. That means you're subject to get support from other sources and at the same time, attract the better athletes to play for your school."

-Craig T. Greenlee

The Miller Years			
YEAR	WON	LOSS	WINNING PERCENTAGE
1973	0	11	.000
1974	9	9	.500
1975	8	4	.666
1976	5	12	.294
1977	19	12	.612
1978	19	8	.703
1979	17	17	.500
1980	25	10	.714
1981	25	13	.657
1982	21	13	.617
1983	17	17	.500
1984	28	12	.700
1985	32	20	.615
1986	34	19	.641
1987	28	9	.756
1988	37	15	.712
1989	28	12	.700
1990	36	16	.692
Career Totals	388	229	.628