

Pitchers excel but UNC needs run production

BY BRIAN MACPHERSON
SENIOR WRITER

Questions exist in the bullpen and at the plate, but most coaches in the United States would sell their souls for the two weapons North Carolina baseball coach Mike Fox can feature at the front of his starting rotation.

Daniel Bard and Andrew Miller took the conference by storm a season ago, emerging as two of the nation's best hurlers as they led the Tar Heels to the title game of the NCAA Tournament's Columbia Regional.

And with the loss of North Carolina's top three run producers from a season ago, the duo will be counted upon heavily to lighten the load for the offense — but they certainly won't surprise anyone this time around.

"They have to understand that it's a new year," Fox said. "Everybody now knows who they are. With expectation comes a different approach from these other teams."

Bard, a 6-foot-4 righthander, was named ACC Freshman of the Year after a season in which he went 8-4 with a 3.88 ERA.

"He throws the ball so unbelievably hard, and it looks so easy," Miller said. "His fastball can get anybody out, and when he has a secondary pitch, he's nearly untouchable."

Miller, a 6-foot-6 lefty whose slider dominated the prestigious Cape Cod Baseball League last summer, surged late in the season to finish at 6-3 with a 2.94 ERA.

"With those two guys, we score one, two runs, we still might win," said second baseman Greg Mangum.

But the Tar Heels — ranked No. 14 to open the season — can't win with only two pitchers, and that's where the competition heats up.

Junior Adam Kalkhof won seven games during his freshman campaign, but shoulder tendonitis plagued him a season ago.

Matt Danford, who turned in a similarly strong freshman season in 2003, missed all of last season after undergoing shoulder surgery. The righty also will compete for a spot in the weekend rotation.

"It's too early for me to say that one person has stepped up and said, 'OK, I'll be the guy,'" Fox said. "And that's good. There'll be some competition."

But questions begin to emerge beyond the front end of the starting rotation.

In particular, Fox faces the task of rebuilding a bullpen that featured four of the most experienced

pitchers in school history. Whitley Benson, Kevin Brower, Michael Gross and Scott Senatore combined to throw 154 1/3 innings a season ago. But all four graduated, and those innings won't be replaced easily.

Sophomore Robert Woodard, a midweek starter last year, and junior Jonathan Hovis likely will see an increased workload this season out of the bullpen.

But Gross, who finished the season with eight saves, also had established himself as the team's closer, and unless one of their young pitchers finds a groove quickly, the Tar Heels will enter the season without one particular player in that role.

Freshman righthander Andrew Carignan will have a chance to earn that spot for himself if he gets off to a strong start.

"I'm more concerned with who's going to be on the mound at the end of the game, when the game's on the line in the last two or three innings," Fox said. "We don't have anybody locked in specifically to that role."

"We're going to miss Michael Gross tremendously this year."

All of the pitching in the world won't do the Tar Heels any good, though, if they can't score runs — and they'll have to do so without the three most productive bats on last year's team.

Third baseman Sammy Hewitt, outfielder Marshall Hubbard and catcher Chris Iannetta combined to hit 43 home runs and drive in 200 runs for North Carolina a season ago, but all three now play their trade on the professional level.

Of the players returning this year, only outfielder Chase Younts hit more than three homers.

None drove in more than 30 runs.

"Last year, we had the power in the middle of the lineup, but one through nine, we were a scrappy team," said outfielder Jay Cox, who hit .329 during a strong rookie season. "We raked in runs in the bottom of the order; we raked in runs in the top of the order."

But the lack of proven pop in the lineup might lend itself to a different brand of baseball at Boshamer Stadium.

"We're going to be a lot more aggressive on the bases," Mangum said. "We're going to do a lot more hitting and running, running and hitting, a lot of bunt and runs, a lot of things to manufacture some runs."

The Tar Heels will need strong seasons from Cox and Mangum, as well as outfielders Matt Ellington

and Ross Cook, to support the strong efforts they anticipate from the pitching staff.

Cox hit .329 last season, tops among returning players, to go along with his three home runs and 24 RBI.

Mangum compiled a .308

batting average and drove in 24 runs.

Justin Webb, a jack-of-all-trades who will see most of his time behind the plate, also could provide punch in the batter's box.

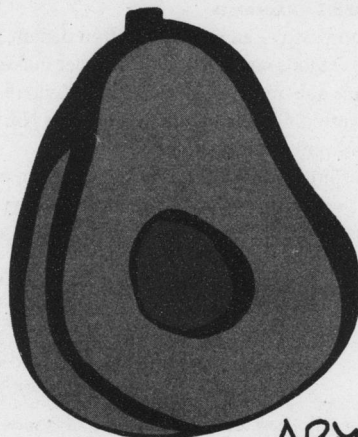
Webb, who primarily played third base and first base a season

ago, hit .281 with two home runs and 19 RBI.

"We won't be a team that's going to be able to score a lot of runs in bunches," Fox said. "So we've got to be a lot more consistent all the way through the lineup, one through nine."

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