

Gator baseball optimistic for NCAC tournament run

Early losses, weather delays hinder start of regular season matchups

[Henry Sutter](#), Sports Editor | March 5, 2020

The Allegheny Baseball team's season has gotten off to a sluggish start after four of the team's first eight games were postponed due to winter weather conditions. Matchups against Alfred State University on Monday, March 2, and State University of New York College at Cortland on Saturday, March 7, have been rescheduled.

The team travelled to Beckley, West Virginia, on Saturday, Feb. 22, and Sunday, Feb. 23, to face John Carroll University. The Gators fell to the Lobos in their first two games 9-16 and 5-18, but rallied to win the third game 9-5.

Allegheny baseball then travelled to Washington and Jefferson College on Thursday, March 5, and defeated the Presidents 10-3. Sean Kealey, '20, struck out 13 batters over seven scoreless innings, bringing his season total to 22 strikeouts.

The Gators finished the 2019 season 22-17 and qualified for the North Coast Athletic Conference Tournament, where they finished their season 1-2 with a pair of losses to No. 16 Denison University. Despite the late

season disappointment, Kealey said the experience will help the team moving into the 2020 season.

We want an opportunity to get into the NCAC tournament,” Kealey said. “Now that we have that experience and have a lot of guys who have been there and know what it takes to get there, with our big (first-year) class, I think we can show them the way. If we get into the tournament, I think we can really make some noise, so it will be fun to watch.”

The team features 13 first-year players, which Kealey said was the largest group since his 2016 class. He described the team’s atmosphere as close-knit despite the new additions to the roster.

“(Having such a large first-year class) has been really cool,” Kealey said. “It makes me feel old for sure. They keep us young, and they’re a fun group of guys to be around. It is a big responsibility for us, especially my senior class, to get them prepared to have a good first season and an even better rest of their career.”

Brett Heckert, '22, said the adjustment to Allegheny baseball can be a difficult transition for first-year players, but the success of the sophomores to start this season shows new players what they can accomplish.

“We have a lot of young guys playing, which is good and bad,” Heckert said. “All the (first-years) have the talent to succeed. (They) just have to get familiar with the pace of play. As the season goes on, we’ll get more

experience. A lot of the sophomores that played last year are really stepping up.”

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— *Sean Kealey*

Through the team’s trip to John Carroll, Heckert’s batting average stood at .545, aided by a 4-for-4 start in the first game. Not to be outdone, Luke Chutko, ’21, batted .667 with three RBIs against John Carroll.

Chutko and Heckert stole two and four bases respectively in the game, and Heckert’s four surpassed his entire 2019 total. Chutko said that it has not been a direct coaching strategy to steal more bases, but the team has the freedom to do so when they have the opportunity.

“Most people have the greenlight (to steal bases),” Chutko said. “If you have the timing and you get a jump, go for it. I think we get on base at a pretty good clip, so if we can continue to steal these bags and put pressure on the other team, that’s going to give us a good chance to be successful.”

Despite a 2-2 record and 10.5 runs allowed per game through the first four games of the season, Chutko said that the team’s goal is fixed on an NCAC championship after making the tournament and falling short in 2019.

“We made the conference playoffs last year, so we’re looking to build off that,” Chutko said. “We’re projected fourth in the (conference) preseason ranking, so that will get us in the playoffs, but that’s not the goal anymore. Now we’re trying to win a conference championship.”

No players from the 2019 team had played in an NCAC tournament game prior to last season because the Gators had not qualified for the tournament since 2015. With more experience and a winning culture throughout the team, Kealey said the team’s atmosphere heading into the remainder of the season will help lead to their success.

“We’re definitely a competitive bunch,” Kealey said. “Practice is competitive, and whenever the infield is doing their work, the outfield is doing their work, Coach (Brandon Crum) really gets on the guys to make them better and prepare them for even more pressure in the games. Just

in our group, we're focused on achieving goals we set, and we're excited to see what we can do."

With weather complications arising, the Gators will not play their first home game at Robertson Baseball Field until April 9, against Penn State Behrend. The team is scheduled to face Grove City College on Wednesday, March 11, before their eight-game spring break road trip to Tucson, Arizona, from Saturday, March 14, to Thursday, March 19.

Weather-related postponements and cancellations are typical early in the season, according to Chutko. He said that despite the delays, the warm weather the team experienced against John Carroll during their victory on Sunday, Feb. 23, reminded him of the spring weather to come and why he plays for the Gators.

"I was very surprised (we were able to play against John Carroll)," Chutko said. "Sunday, (Feb. 23), was beautiful, sunny, not too much wind. It felt like an April game, so it was really nice. It was good to be out there again."