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Year of the pitcher

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Bruce Hefflinger
May 1, 2011



By BRUCE HEFFLINGER

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The big question surrounding the current high school baseball season is

how it will be remembered.

The wrong way: "The year of bad weather."

The right way: "The year of the pitcher."

At the rate the season is going, Defiance's streak of winning 20 games every year since Tom Held has been head coach could come to an end. Heck, if the rain continues like it has been the Bulldogs will be lucky to get in 20 games without a nice tournament run.

Even when the games have been played this year most have been in cold temperatures - if not on wet diamonds.

"The first four weeks of the season have been the coldest I've ever seen," Held said. "I've only wore my jersey twice."

Jackets and stocking caps have been in use instead.

Are heated dugouts on the horizon?

"It's just been miserable," Held added.

Luckily for the DHS mentor, and many other coaches in the area, outstanding pitching has made things a bit less wretched.

How good is the pitching in northwest Ohio?

"Anybody that follows baseball in the four-county area (Defiance, Henry, Fulton and Williams) has to love this," Held said. "The norm now are kids that throw 85 (miles per hour). Edon has three, Bryan has three, we have three, Napoleon has a couple. It's just amazing."

Becoming a good pitcher is not as hard as it seems, at least according to Held.

"It's simple," Held said. "Throw, throw, throw and build arm strength."

But gaining that knowledge as well as ways to make the arm stronger took some research for Held.

"We have learned through our players," the DHS coach explained. "Nathan Smith was the guinea pig back in 1995 when I was at Bryan. I learned by reading and going to clinics.

"We tried things with him such as softball, tennis and baseball sequence. He threw 65 (mph) as a freshman but he continued to work at it."

By the time he graduated Smith was throwing 90 miles an hour and went on to play collegiately at Ohio State on a baseball scholarship.

While standout pitchers such as Doug and Chris Carpenter and Kolbrin Vitek followed at Bryan, Defiance has become a place known for its pitchers since Held came over in 1999.

Chad Billingsley and Jon Niese have taken their pitching talents to the major leagues while others are in the minors or college honing their skills, which were first learned on the pitching mounds in northwest Ohio.

"I think Chad and Jon benefited from what we do here." Held said.

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"Now there are others in the area that see what's happened at Defiance and they all think they can make it if they work at it."

It's worked so well other coaches in the area use some of the same teaching techniques being used by Held.

"All good coaches adopt what has worked in other programs and I have been fortunate enough to become friends with coach Held at Defiance," noted Napoleon head baseball coach Justin Firks. "We have implemented their throwing mechanics drill work, winter velocity drills etc. I know that it has had a tremendous impact on the pitchers in our program and we hope to continue to develop power arms."

The development of good arms has become more and more noticeable to coaches and fans as well as college and pro scouts, which are now routinely seen throughout the area.

"The pitching in northwest Ohio has been outstanding this season," Firks said. "I believe that it's a trend that will continue."

It's been going on for some time at Defiance.

On the visiting dugout at Booster Field is a sign proclaiming "The 90 Club" which lists pitchers that have thrown 90 miles per hour since Held has been at the helm of the Bulldogs. Starting with Luke Hagerty in 1999, the number of DHS pitchers to hit that magical number has now grown to a dozen with the recent additions of Jake Sanchez and Anthony Kidston.

A senior, Sanchez, who has turned into a part-time closer for the Bulldogs this season, had never thrown harder than 86 before last week.

"He was 77 to 82 a year ago," Held said. "But he lost 25 pounds and that's huge. He's become more flexible. He hit 90 and 91 that day. It's just a result of throwing. He's thrown non-stop."

Are there others like Sanchez out there?.

"I firmly believe there are kids in every school in the United States that can throw 90," Held said. "But there are three things you have to have. First, you've got to play baseball. You can't throw 90 if you don't play baseball. Second, you have to have the genetics."

Certain builds and muscle structures - long and lean - are preferred.

"Finally, you have to have a work ethic and a good attitude," Held continued. "You have to be willing to learn."

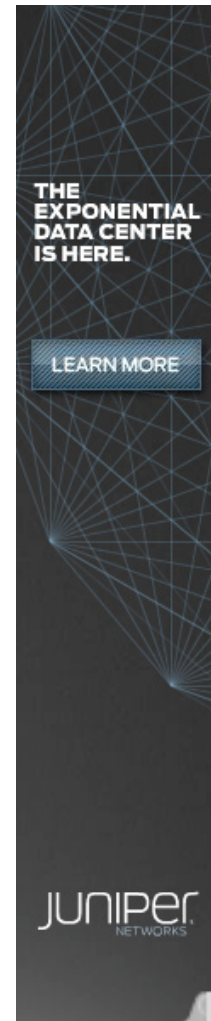
"Everyone can make it if you have those three things. Size has a lot to do with it, but not everything. Look at Tyler Burgoon (former Defiance standout who is now pitching in the minor leagues). It's awesome that someone his size (5-10, 160) can do it."

In northwest Ohio it seems everyone is doing it these days.

Well ... when it's not too cold and wet.

It's then when coaches are forced to come up with ways to keep the players from not getting bored with the same routine.

"We've had some full inside practices lately just like in the pre-season,"



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Held explained. "We do our normal hitting, sprint work and throwing. Then we try to mix things up.

"We might do some mental classroom stuff or we might have a wiffle ball bunting game. But we still keep practices the same length."

Firks is doing his best to keep his squad fresh as well with so many games being postponed.

"Our emphasis has been on controlling the things we have control over, unfortunately the weather is not one of them," Firks said. "We have done a couple things to liven up practice. First and foremost, we have started to incorporate more fielding competitions during practice. Our kids love to compete and it really picks up the energy during practice.

"Secondly, we have incorporated more situational hitting rounds in practice sessions. Our goal has been to get them to focus in on one or two areas that will improve our team offensively. We have shortened the length of our practice and have emphasized taking every swing, every ground ball or fly ball with a purpose."

And when the weather is finally nice enough for game action, both Held and Firks are among the area coaches fortunate enough to have solid starters to count on.

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