

# No. 2 Ranked Scots Ready to Make Another Run at National Championship

Editorial and photos courtesy of Wooster Athletics

After coming as close as it ever has to winning the national championship, The College of Wooster is revved up to take another shot at that elusive crown in 2010. The tradition-rich program has three top-three finishes in the NCAA Div. III Baseball Championships over the last 13 seasons (two runner-ups and one third-place), and with seven of its top-nine hitters as well as two of its top-four pitchers returning from a squad that lost a heartbreaker in last year's national title game – 3-2 to the University of St. Thomas (Minn.) in 12 innings – the Fighting Scots have plenty of reasons to think they can make another run at it.

"The last day left a pretty bitter taste in their mouths," said 29th-year head coach Tim Pettorini. "Whether they're capable of repeating last year's performance, (we'll see.) But, I think they're motivated to do the thing."

Before Wooster, ranked No. 2 in the D3baseball.com preseason poll, can ponder the NCAA tourney, it will look to add another North Coast Athletic Conference championship to its trophy case. Under Pettorini, the Scots have won the NCAC 12 times in the league's 25-year history, including last spring, and they'll likely be favored to repeat, thanks to the experience this season's group possesses.

"One of the big things is we have 10 seniors and I think a lot of those kids played significant roles last year," Pettorini commented. "I don't think we're going to be starting too many guys who haven't played in some really big games."

Another reason for optimism is the squad's balance. Once just an offensive juggernaut year after year, Wooster now regularly has



enough pitching to carry it in the postseason, and that should be the case again.

Anchoring the staff will be Justin McDowell, a junior right-hander who went from being a projected No. 3 or No. 4 starter for the Scots to multiple All-American honors as the team's ace last spring. He tied one school record with 13 wins (13-3) and broke another for innings pitched (113.2) while compiling a 2.38 ERA and 94 strikeouts.

Last year's projected ace was Matt Barnes, but he suffered an injury after starting the opener and never returned. Back healthy and maintaining junior eligibility, the coaching staff says the hard-throwing right-hander "could be dominant," as he builds on his 14-5 record, 3.38 ERA, and 139 strikeouts in 130.1 career innings.

It appears that senior right-hander Matt DeGrand will hold down a top-three spot in the rotation again. One of the team's tri-captains, DeGrand's value to the squad has been understated throughout his career, which includes a 7-2 mark last season when he worked 73.0 innings and earned all-conference status (honorable mention).

The rest of the pitcher's roles may not be settled at this time, but Pettorini has plenty of options to call on. Additional veterans he can give the ball to include seniors Tanner Hall and Nate Gemberling-Johnson, junior Tyler Fugate, and sophomore Dan O'Brien, all of whom piled up double-digit innings a year ago. Hall developed an effective side-arm delivery, highlighted by 5.0 scoreless innings during Wooster's fourth game of the NCAA finals. Gemberling-Johnson is a hard thrower who could become the closer, while Fugate will likely be used in a variety of roles after progressing into a key middle reliever last spring.

O'Brien, along with Josh Stidham, Landon Wahl, and Kyle Cunningham-Rhoads, is among a talented



sophomore class, which Pettorini says “really needs to emerge.” O’Brien threw the most innings as a rookie (17.2), going 2-0 with a 4.08 ERA along the way, but all of them have the potential to wind up as a top-tier starter or in a key relief role.

Another expected to play an integral part is Keenan White, who leads three freshmen pitchers. The staff’s lone lefty may see significant innings right away, according to Pettorini.

Offensively, Wooster has even more proven veterans, headlined by All-American Matt Groezinger and fellow seniors Stu Beath, Matthew Johnson, Luke Sutton, and Shane Swearingen. Groezinger, a team tri-captain, is a switch-hitting clean-up man with power from both sides and can play a variety of positions in the field – first base, right field, or DH. Last year, he clubbed 19 doubles and 12 home runs, while driving in 73 runs as part of a .369 average en route to first-team all-NCAC and second-team all-region accolades.

Batting in the No. 3 hole and the probable left fielder again will be Beath after putting up a .389 average and 23 doubles, which tied for the second-most

in team history, in his first full season as a starter. He has particularly excelled in NCAA Tournament play during his career, sporting a .414 average (29-for-70) in such games.

Johnson returns to the lineup, where he may bat leadoff while continuing to provide stellar defense up the middle, after missing most of the second half of last year. Prior to an injury, he was batting .354 with nine stolen bases, upping his career average to .322.

Sutton and Swearingen may not have posted as big offensive numbers as some of their teammates, but they were vital cogs during last spring’s postseason run. Sutton, the starting right fielder, batted a respectable .297 and was often charged with moving runners over, witness his 10 combined sacrifices. Swearingen started at the all-important catcher position for 43 games and produced a .289 average, highlighted by a home run during the national championship round.

The other returning position players are rising sophomores Zack Vesco and Michael DeBord, both of whom developed into productive and reliable parts of the starting lineup during their initial year. Vesco, recruited as a catcher, became the starter at third and compiled a .387 average, including .423 (11-for-26) over the six-game finals of the Div. III Baseball Championships, while DeBord hit even better for the sea-



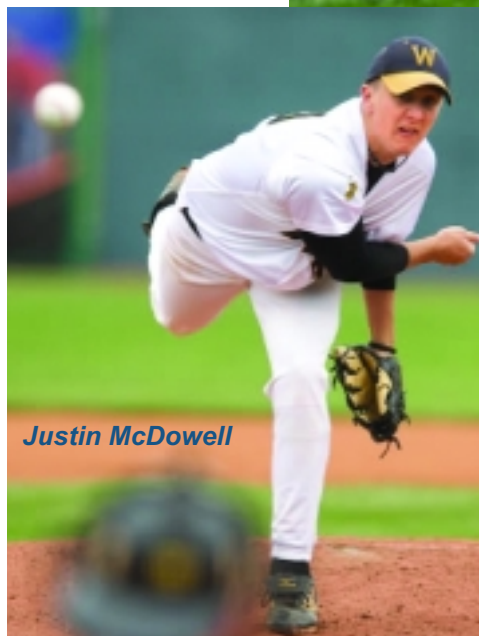
*Anthony Trapuzzano*



*Zack Vesco*



*Tanner Hall*



*Justin McDowell*

son at .414 and served as the back-up catcher and DH.

Additional veterans Pettorini is welcoming back include senior outfielder Chris Wood, junior infielders Phil Pie’ and Derek Wyman, and sophomore infielder/pitcher Colin Meinzer. Wood is in contention for the starting position in center, while Wyman and Meinzer are in the mix for increased playing time after both batted around .230 over a combined 165 at bats a year ago. Pie’ provides the team a pivotal pinch runner.

They’ll be joined by nine new position players, including highly-touted Greg Van Horn, a junior transfer from Princeton University. Van Horn is expected to compete for the starting shortstop position and find a spot in the middle of the order after accumulating a .303 clip as Princeton’s No. 3 hole hitter last spring. Also of note, fellow transfers Chris Constantine and Christian Lauer, both of Greensboro College, have the ability to make an immediate impact, as does freshman outfielder Michael Wellstead.

Pettorini is excited about the prospects of several other first-years, but they may have to wait their turn to contribute. “Last year, we didn’t have much depth,” he said. “We do have a lot more flexibility, more options in the

outfield and on the mound. Hopefully, we don’t have any injuries, but if we do, hopefully we can withstand them a lot better.”

On paper, the Scots may have more talent than in 2009. Add in the extra motivation after coming oh-so-close to the national championship, and maybe that could translate into winning the ultimate prize this time around.

“(We) hope to have a good chance to play at the end,” summed up Pettorini. “I think this team is equipped to be pretty good. Offensively, we have power, maybe a little more speed than what we had last year. I know guys will hit for a high average. Defensively ... that’s as good up the middle maybe as we’ve ever been. Pitching-wise, it’s a deep staff, as deep as we’ve had. I like all the pieces of it.”