

## A Major League Education

*Southern Ohio Copperheads Helps Players Hit Home Runs and Gain Real-World Experience*

*Submitted by Fahlgren Mortine Public Relations - by: Ben Strunk*



**F**ew things say summer more accurately than the cracking sound of a wooden bat or the feel of a worn leather glove snagging the last out of an inning. In the foothills of the Appalachian region, the Southern Ohio Copperheads are preserving America's favorite pastime in its truest form — and helping players to succeed beyond the baseball fields of Athens, Ohio.

Developed in 2002 through the work of several Ohio University administrators and affiliates of OU baseball, the Southern Ohio Copperheads organization is comprised of players from colleges across the country. Since the team's inception, the Copperheads have called Ohio University's Bob Wren Stadium home. Located as the center of OU's athletics mall, Trautwein Field at Bob Wren Stadium boasts a seating capacity of 2,000, as well as a state-of-the-art playing field for these talented student athletes. Under the stadium's lights, players are polishing their skills and getting a taste of professional baseball while playing against some of baseball's most notable rising stars.

"The team really started as a conversation at lunch one day in 2000," said Dave Palmer, general manager of the Copperheads since 2004. "Some university and community leaders thought it would be great to have a minor league team playing in Athens during the summer. They went and talked to the head baseball coach at Ohio University, Joe Carbone, who thought a wooden-bat collegiate team would be more than feasible for the town."

Carbone had coached for the Great Lakes Summer Collegiate League in previous years, and several advocates for creating an Athens-based team proposed hosting a game to show league commissions what the town had to offer.

"In 2001, we hosted a game between the Great Lakes All-Star players and the U.S. Nationals team," Palmer said. "Everyone had a great time, and as a result, the Great Lakes Summer Collegiate League invited us to create a team as part of the league."

The Copperheads are one of the 11 teams from the Midwest who form the Great Lakes Summer Collegiate League, sponsored

in part by Major League Baseball. As one of the 25 collegiate leagues nationwide to use wooden bats, the Southern Ohio Copperheads operate under NCAA rules.

"Being part of the National Alliance of Summer Collegiate Baseball, we honor the same rules and regulations as the Cape Cod League and other well-established clubs," said Palmer. "We're proud to adhere to those codes of conduct and believe they're necessary to develop the kind of team where student athletes have a chance to truly focus on improving their skills."

### Baseball Basics Lead to Success

And improve their skills they have. Coming off a strong 2010 season finish and a play-off run in 2009, the Copperheads are no strangers to success on the field. Wrapping up their 2010 season with a 23-14 regular season run and playoff appearance, head coach Mike Florak has built a solid foundation for attracting quality talent year after year.

"We're really proud of our accomplishments this season," said Florak. "It was great for everyone involved. Our players were truly unselfish, and the culmination of our season demonstrates how their potential really blossomed into ability."

"I've played for other teams before, but playing for the Copperheads was like reaching a whole new level," said Rob Moir, a junior from Boston College. "This organization presented me with everything I needed to be a better player. The facilities were great, especially compared to some of the other fields I've seen."

From the beginning of the season, this year's players made it clear they were willing to work together as a team instead of focusing on their own goals.

"During a couple of our first games this season, we had two consecutive 10-9, come-from-behind-to-win games," Florak said. "Those both really pumped up our players and gave the guys a sense that we were never really out of the game. Even when we might be down at first, we could still come back to win if we played solid baseball and followed through with the basics of the game."

"I know my experience with the Copperheads advanced my



baseball skills and will help as I continue my college career," said Moir. "I felt really taken care of as a Copperheads player. Meals were provided and our uniforms were washed; it was great for me to just focus on playing baseball and taking my game to the next level."

### Beyond Athens

"I think a number of our players definitely have bright futures ahead of them," said Florak. "Their work ethic moving forward will determine who gets a chance to move on, and I know the work they've done here has helped them improve their game. As a coach, I really like being part of something where I'm helping our players to hone their skills and launch the next phase of their careers."

More than 40 of the team's players have advanced to professional baseball since 2002, drafted by teams like the Chicago White Sox, Cincinnati Reds, Texas Rangers, Tampa Bay Rays, New York Yankees, Washington Nationals and more.

"The fact that so many of our players have been drafted and that we have support from Major League Baseball is a true testament to the quality of our program," said Florak. "Scouts are around during our season, but especially for the All-Star Game and the tournament. If players are consistent and can showcase their talents when the scouts are watching, it really helps their chances of being drafted."

"The Great Lakes Summer Collegiate League is still very much an up and coming league," said Palmer. "We're approaching our 25th anniversary and that makes us one of the solid leagues out there. With our team being only nine years old, we don't have the tradition or history that some other teams enjoy. However, our reputation is growing rapidly and we certainly offer our fans and players a quality, fun experience game after game."

"Our number one responsibility is to develop players," said Palmer. "Winning and losing is important, but we truly want to develop our players to a higher level. We play between 40 and 48 games in a regular season; we don't want to send them back to



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college injured, so it's about balancing everyone's expectations. There can be quite a tightrope to walk between the aspects of team development and success and keeping our players healthy."

Even on the tightrope, the Copperheads seem to have found their balance and are already planning for next season.

"This is the time of year where we're figuring out who wants to come back and spending a lot of time talking with coaches," said Florak. "There are numerous coaching changes at the college level, which means we are still waiting for some coaches to decide where they'd like to send their players. That process has already started, but it will go on with changes up until next July. We're always recruiting."

### One Team, One Mission

"We put on a big show, and it's a lot of fun," said Palmer. "Fun for the players to improve their skills; fun for staff to entertain our fans; and fun for fans to come to a friendly, exciting game. It's all part of one big team that works together."

"It's a lot of turnaround and work, but the great reviews we get from players, fans and baseball parents make it all worth it," Palmer said. "We want our fans to have a good time and our players to advance their game. At the end of the day, that's what it's all about."

