



Photo by John Blackie

# SENIOR-DOMINATED ARGONAUTS LOOKING TO MAKE HISTORY

By Bill Ballew

**M**ike Jeffcoat had a feeling upon entering the 2011 season that his University of West Florida team could be a sleeping giant. While the Argonauts' head coach realized he had lost 11 players from the previous year's squad that advanced to the NCAA Tournament for only the second time in school history and was ranked as high as 29th in the nation, Jeffcoat also knew the talent, particularly among his most experienced players, that would take the diamond at Jim Spooner Field.

"We knew we had a good club coming back with six starters returning," Jeffcoat said. "We also had five pitchers who were a big part of our staff last year. But just as important was the way the junior college guys and our freshmen gelled with the team last fall. That's why I said in the preseason that I thought we had a real good shot to make a deep run in the postseason and had the makeup for a championship team."

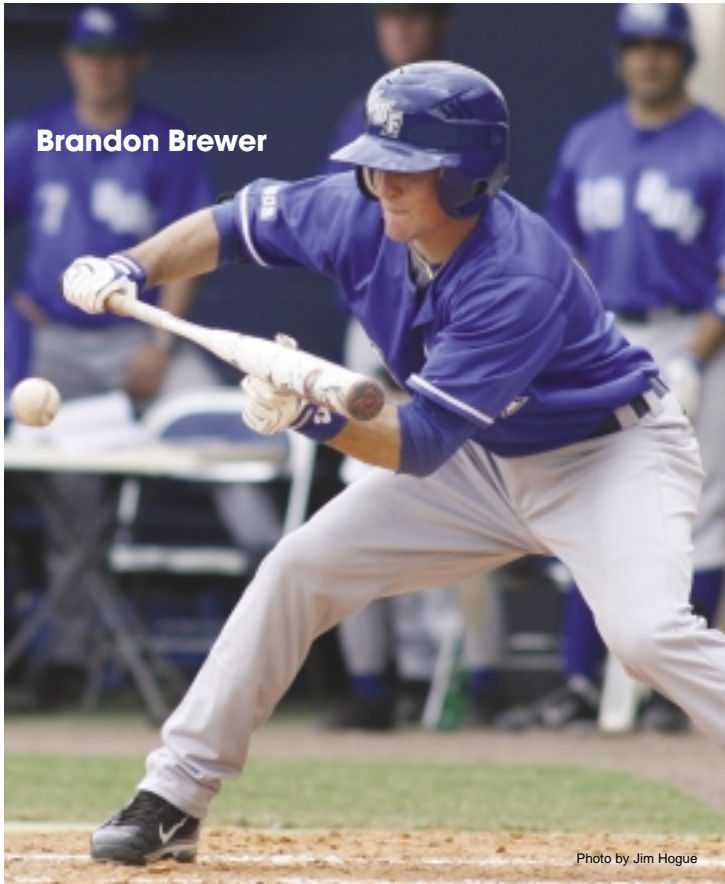
Yet even the ever-optimistic Jeffcoat did not expect the Argos to have as much success as they achieved during the first two-and-a-half months of the 2011 campaign. UWF won its first five contests to open the slate before dropping a 7-2 decision to Flagler on Feb. 12. After winning eight straight, the Argonauts lost a pair of contests at North Georgia on March 1-2. West Florida split a doubleheader at Valdosta State on March 5 and then proceeded to reel off 21 straight triumphs, including a 17-6 win over Mobile in Pensacola on April 12.

In the process of getting off to a 35-4 overall record, including a 10-1 start in the Gulf South Conference, the Argos were ranked atop the National



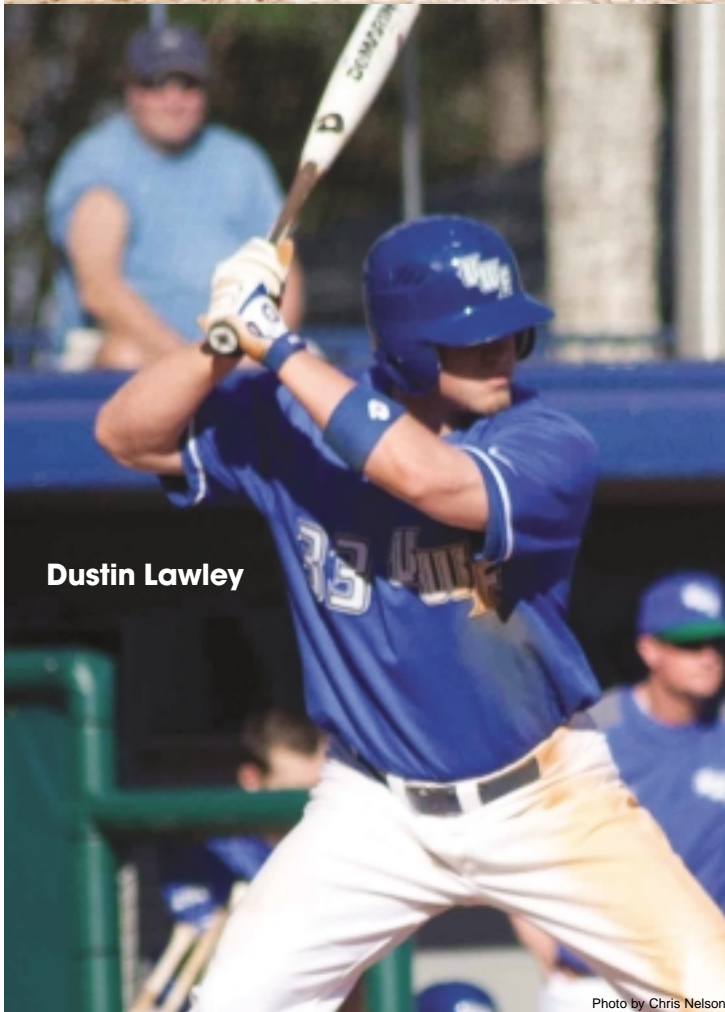
Coach Mike Jeffcoat

Photo by John Blackie



Brandon Brewer

Photo by Jim Hogue



Dustin Lawley

Photo by Chris Nelson

Collegiate Baseball Writers Association Division II poll in each of the first two weeks of April. The contributions have come from every aspect of the game, ranging from great pitching that includes a no-hitter and another near-perfect game to a relentless offense that was batting .345 as a team and had outscored its opponent by a 313-119 margin.

"We have a great group of seniors," Jeffcoat said. "In fact, our senior and junior classes make up three-quarters of our team, and we have great leadership. That's played a big part in our success this season. Our guys are very close, and we have seniors that are role players, guys who aren't starters, and pitchers who haven't pitched a lot. They've come up to me and said, 'Coach, don't worry about me. I just want to win a ring and make some special memories.' That makes it a lot easier on the coach and gives this team a special chemistry you rarely see."

Much of the Argos' Class of 2011 represents Jeffcoat's third recruiting class. A standout reliever at West Florida in 1990-91 who posted nine saves in two seasons and recorded a 1.99 ERA as a senior, Jeffcoat took over the head coaching reins on Aug. 8, 2005, replacing Jim Spooner, who guided the program for 23 of its initial 25 seasons. Prior to taking the top job, Jeffcoat had been head coach for five years at Alabama Southern Community College before spending a five-year stint as the UWF pitching coach under Spooner.

Currently in his sixth season at the dugout helm, Jeffcoat has always strived to find student-athletes who possess the important balance that includes excelling in both the classroom and on the field. He feels he hit the jackpot with several players who are now seniors. That group features five young men who have worn the royal blue and Kelly green for the past four years—right fielder Greg Pron, shortstop Brandon Brewer, catcher Tyler Hastings, left fielder Eric Kroll and pitcher Sixto Velasco.

"We have a core from the '08 freshman class," Jeffcoat said. "All these guys have been through the battles, going to the East Regional last year and to the conference tournament in two of their first three years. They just want to win a ring. They aren't concerned about individual accolades. They have truly bought into the Harry S. Truman quote of 'when nobody cares who gets the credit, great things can be accomplished.'"

That mantra is personified in several positions, beginning with Pron. The right fielder led the Argos with a .422 batting average while also topping the team with 57 hits, 15 doubles, three triples and a .644 slugging percentage through the first 39 games. The Daphne, Ala., native earned second team all-conference honors in 2009 and 2010 prior to breaking the school's career RBI mark on March 5, 2011, when he went 2-for-3 with a home run at Valdosta State. He also ranked second on the UWF hits list upon entering the final month of play.

Pron has been joined in the lineup for nearly every game over the past three years by Brewer and Hastings. Brewer started 203 of his first 204 games with the Argonauts, becoming the school's all-time leader in walks and sacrifice bunts in the process. The Apopka, Fla., native was a member of the Gold Glove South Region team and a second team all-conference pick in 2009, when he hit .293, his highest average during his first three slates. The 2011 campaign, however, has been his best at the plate, with Brewer batting a lofty .415 with a team-best .507 on-base percentage.

Hastings joined Pron on the 2011 Preseason All-GSC team after the former earned second-team honors in 2009 and first-team recognition last year. A .337 hitter in his first 37 games this season, Hastings has thrown out more than one-third of would-be base stealers during his collegiate career while doing an impressive job of helping guide the Argos' pitching staff.

Kroll has been a part-time starter throughout his four seasons at West Florida. The Pace, Fla., product was in the starting lineup for 17 of his first 26 appearances this year and responded with a .328 batting average and 16 RBI in his initial 58 at-bats. The right-handed Velasco went 4-4 with 13 saves during his first



Eric Kroll

Photo by Bill Stockland



Tyler Hastings

Photo by Jim Hogue



Greg Pron

Photo by Jim Hogue

.344 clip with six homers and 56 RBI in 2010.

Seniors are also prominent on the West Florida pitching staff, headed by the team's top two weekend starters in righthanders Jason Postill and Daniel Vargas-Vila. Through his first 10 starts this season, Postill owned a 9-0 record with a 1.95 ERA while recording a team-high 69.1 innings and 76 strikeouts. A transfer from Tallahassee Community College, the 6-foot, 185-pounder earned second-team All-GSC recognition last year while going 5-6 with a 3.50 ERA, which ranked fourth in the conference.

Vargas-Vila was 8-1 with a 2.33 ERA through his initial 10 starts while piling up 49 strikeouts in 65.2 frames. The Wallace State-Dothan transfer was a first-team All-GSC recipient in his debut with the Argos in 2010 while going 8-3 with a 4.16 ERA. So far this year, Vargas-Vila has tossed two one-hitters, including one against Arkansas Tech on March 13 when he retired the first 26 batters he faced. He then walked pinch-hitter Michael Milum before Matt Johnson singled through the right side to break up his bid for a no-hitter. Earlier in the slate, against Delta State on Feb. 20, Vargas-Vila allowed only one hit and three walks over nine frames to earn the win.

While Vargas-Vila earned GSC Pitcher of the Week honors following both of his one-hitters, junior Ben Hawkins received the same recognition upon making history on April 9 against West Alabama. The southpaw from Rome, Ga., tossed only the second no-hitter in UWF annals as a D-II program while allowing two walks and hitting a pair of batters and striking out a career-high 12. He also received National Player of the Week accolades while lowering his staff-best ERA to 0.86 and holding opponents to a .210 in between winning all nine of his decisions.

Hawkins headlines a strong class of juniors that includes four starters. Left fielder Taye Larry led the team with 19 steals and owned a .318 batting average. Corey Domenick settled at first base after playing other positions and was hitting .315. Third baseman Josh Huggins was second on the team with five home runs while batting at a .318 clip. Second baseman Leo Lamarche had a .333 batting average with 26 RBI, which ranked fourth on the

three seasons on the Pensacola campus before making the first two starts of his college career this year. He had made six appearances overall, recording 13 strikeouts in his first 10.1 innings in 2011.

Two other seniors have been in Jeffcoat's starting lineup more often than not. Center fielder Dustin Lawley joined Brewer as the only two players to start each of the first 39 games this season. Lawley, who transferred to UWF after playing at Wallace State Community College, is manning the middle garden for the first time after playing third base last season. He has made the move with aplomb, committing only three errors while leading the team with seven home runs and 43 RBI while hitting .337 and stealing 17 bases in his first 21 attempts. Joining Lawley from Wallace State two years ago was designated hitter Zach Taylor, who owned a .388 batting average in his first 31 appearances this season after hitting at a

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squad.

Seniors, meanwhile, were handling the bulk of the bullpen work, led by righthander Shane Waller, who had six saves and a 1.50 ERA. Fellow righthanders Jordan Rasinski and Zach North were also effective, with the former going 1-1 with a save and a 2.35 ERA in his first 15.1 innings and the latter posting a 1-0 mark with a 3.38 ERA in his initial 16 frames this season. The lone underclassman to make a significant contribution on the diamond thus far in 2011 is freshman lefthander Kevin Peters, who was 4-1 with a 1.09 ERA in 10 games, including five mid-week starts.

Given their impressive record, the Argos obviously have tremendous ability on the field. Jeffcoat, however, requires more of his players than the talent to perform between the white lines. He also is adamant that members of his team are dedicated toward getting a degree, which is an area West Florida takes tremendous pride in.

"The University of West Florida has always been a great academic school," Jeffcoat said. "We're hoping to build great people, not just great athletes. So we really stress what it takes to be a student-athlete and how they have to do their job in the classroom. They have to buy into the fact that they not only represent themselves but also the University of West Florida, the baseball team and the Pensacola community. All of their actions are going to reflect on the group as a whole. We want guys who have good character and a strong foundation of morals. That's where it starts with us. There are a lot of athletes with a lot of great ability, but if they don't have good character and heart, you're not going to win many games."

While Jeffcoat learned from a legend in Spooner, the devotion to the university is obvious throughout the entire coaching staff. Assistant head coach Shane Gierke, who heads the program's recruiting efforts, is a former catcher who graduated from West Florida in 2003 and is in his eighth season as a member of the Argos' staff. Graduate assistant coach Pat Cottrell earned his degree from UWF in 2004, while fellow graduate assistant coach Kyle Brown was a member of the Class of 2010 after he too played for Jeffcoat.

"Cohesiveness is so important in having your athletes and coaches understanding and embracing the tradition and history of your program," Jeffcoat said. "Certainly you can have assistants who come from outside that circle and can be very good, but I've been fortunate enough to have guys help me who have played for us. For instance, Shane has a lot of great pride in the university and the program. He knows what we're looking for, and he does an outstanding job of identifying those student-athletes



Photo by Bill Stockland

who can help win in the classroom and on the field."

With Jeffcoat and Gierke serving as the program's only full-time coaches, the Argos are limited in resources and by budget in terms of how much recruiting they can do in order to make certain they are signing the right type of players to letters of intent. It's for that reason West Florida reaches out to high school players in hopes of discovering ones that are truly interested and capable of becoming members of the program.

"Obviously it's very difficult for us to get out and see everybody," Jeffcoat said. "We don't have the ability to get out and see a lot of high school and junior college games due to our schedule and the other demands of the job. So we have two showcases every year—one at the end of our season around the first of June and one in the fall. Those are for kids who are interested in our program and want to show us their ability. We do a combined workout and a small intersquad game. While they're here they are able to tour our facility and our campus. That helps us get our eyeballs on them to see if it's worth our while to go back and see them with their respective schools."

In Greek mythology, an Argonaut was one who sailed with Jason on the Argo in search of the Golden Fleece. Jeffcoat's group of Argonauts is engaged in a similar hunt involving the D-II national championship. In many ways, West Florida has reached uncharted waters already this season by earning its first number one ranking in school history. Yet while such recognition is laudable, Jeffcoat admits there is much more this group of seniors and juniors wants to achieve this spring.

"That's all you can ask for, to have your team be in position to compete in the postseason and possibly win a championship," Jeffcoat said. "The mid-year accolades and 21-game win streak and being ranked number one in the polls are all wonderful, but that's not what you're ultimately hoping to accomplish. We have a lot of things we want to check off our checklist that we haven't been able to yet. Honestly, we didn't have being number one and a winning streak on our checklist. That's just part of the process and helped us get to this point.

"Since moving up to Division II in '95, that's been our dream, to get to the College World Series and play for the national championship. That's what we work for every single day and hopefully at some point that can become a reality."



Photo by Bill Stockland

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