

TEAM SPOTLIGHT

MALONEY LOOKS TO BUILD ON

MICHIGAN'S BASEBALL TRADITION

by Bill Ballew

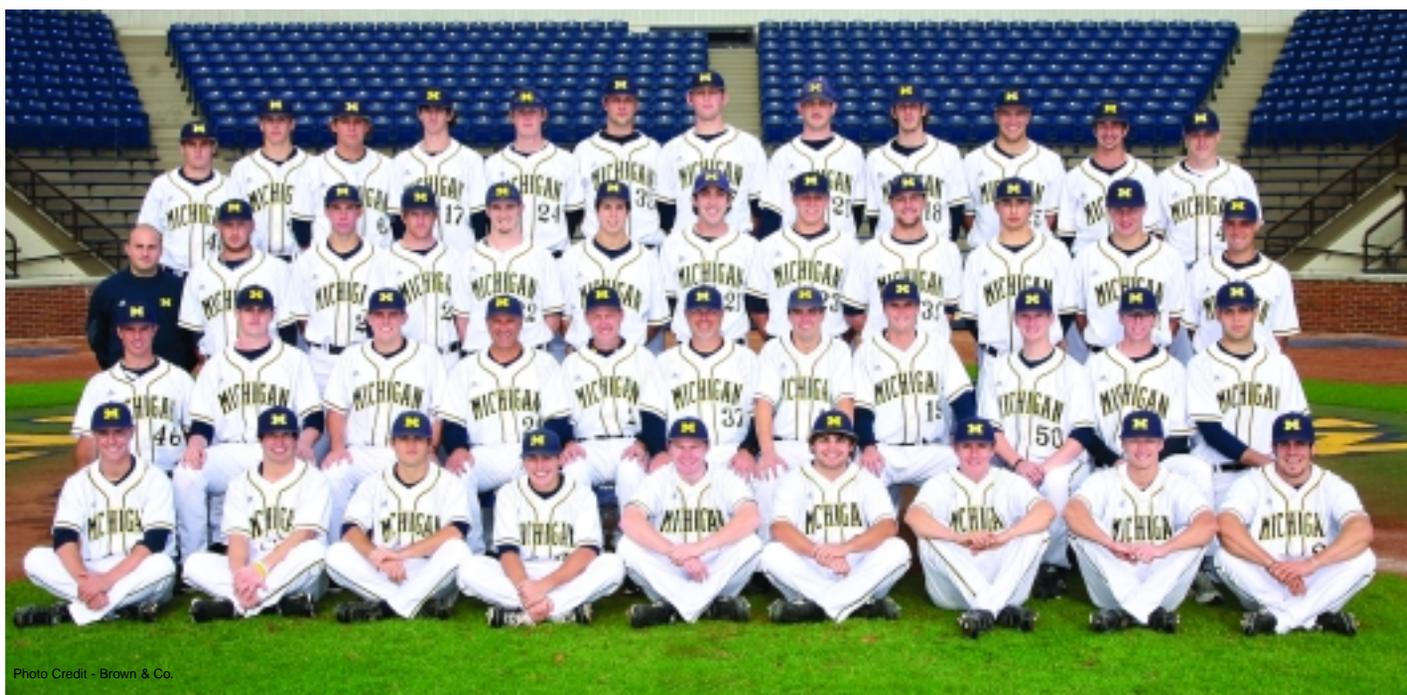


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When the National Baseball Hall of Fame announced in January that former shortstop Barry Larkin was the newest member of the hallowed shrine in Cooperstown, N.Y., most media reports centered on the fact that he had played his entire career in the major leagues with the Cincinnati Reds. Without question his election brought smiles to the faces of fans throughout the Queen City, which were rivaled only by the pride felt as well 240 miles north in Ann Arbor, Mich.

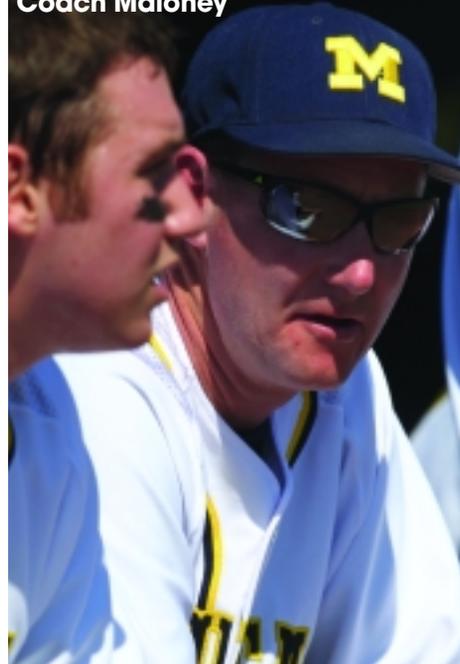
Prior to joining the Reds as the fourth overall selection in the 1985 draft, Larkin was an All-America shortstop as a sophomore and junior who helped guide the Michigan Wolverines to the College World Series in 1983 and 1984. His career performance is among the best ever seen on the picturesque campus, one that includes ranking among the school's top 10 in triples (3rd with 13), runs scored (5th with 172),

stolen bases (T8th with 44) and batting average (10th at .361). And because of his feats at the game's top level, Larkin becomes the fourth Wolverine inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame, following in the footsteps of George Sisler, who lettered at Michigan from 1913-15; Charlie Gehringer, a freshman letterman in 1923; and Branch Rickey, who coached the baseball team from 1910-13 while attending Michigan Law School.

Baseball, in fact, dates to 1866 on the Ann Arbor campus, making it the oldest sport at Michigan. The Wolverines are also the fourth-winningest program in college baseball annals. During that stretch of some 145 years, the team has claimed 35 Big Ten titles and eight regional crowns and made seven appearances in the College World Series. Michigan won the national championship in 1953 and 1962, and reached Omaha five times in a seven-year span, from 1978 to 1984.

"We've had a great tradition at

Coach Maloney





Derek Dennis



John Lorenz

Michigan, long before I ever came,” said current Wolverine head coach Rich Maloney, who was named to the dugout helm in 2003 after an impressive stint at Ball State. “One of the advantages of coaching at a school like Michigan is the name or the brand is known worldwide. Michigan is known as a great research institution, and the legendary football coach, Bo Schembechler, really made the school a household name. Because of that, there’s a good chance you’ll see the black and gold ‘M’ no matter where you go. That gives us immediate credibility whenever we’re recruiting.”

Maloney has done his part to uphold the proud baseball tradition at Ray Fisher Stadium. He guided the Wolverines to three straight Big Ten Conference titles, from 2006 to 2008, and four consecutive appearances in an NCAA Regional, from 2005 to 2008. After a 30-25 season in 2009, Michigan placed second in the league in 2010 with a 35-22 mark but finished third in the tournament to miss out on post-season play for the second time in as many years.

That type of overall success is what made the 2011 campaign stick out like the proverbial sore thumb. Beset by injuries and inconsistent play, the Wolverines finished in last place in the Big Ten while winning only 17 of 54 outings, marking the program’s lowest victory total since a 16-18 slate in 1970. Yet while other

coaches might be pointing fingers or worried about their futures, the ever-passionate Maloney believes last season was simply a blip on the radar screen.

“I’m excited about our team,” Maloney said. “We had a lot of injuries last year, which was strange. It was kind of like the perfect storm hit our team. We’re getting some of those boys back. And having gone through that type of season, I believe it created a hunger. We’ve been fortunate to have a good bit of success since I’ve been at Michigan, and then out of nowhere we had the season we had last year. It was very difficult, and we got humbled quite a bit. The guys are now fighting back because they obviously didn’t like the feeling they had to go through. We saw the other side of the coin and we didn’t like it.”

Maloney has good reason to be optimistic. He returns every starter in the field as well as three of his top four starting pitchers. He also welcomed a talented class of 14 freshmen who showed positive signs during fall practice. Meshing the newcomers with the returnees went well in the fall, leading the head coach to say, “We have a lot of experience at several positions, and I was impressed with the new guys we brought in. I saw some guys come back with some renewed vigor.”

The men on the mound will be led by senior righthander

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Brandon Sinnery. The Massachusetts native posted a solid 2.91 ERA last season in 15 games and seven starts but had only a 2-5 record to show for his efforts. Nevertheless, Sinnery received All-Big Ten third-team honors. He should be joined in the rotation by junior lefthander Bobby Brosnahan, who is coming off a difficult slate in which he went 1-9 with a 7.82 ERA in 14 outings, including 12 starts. Junior righthander Kyle Clark is also expected to start after he registered a 2-4 mark and a 3.59 ERA in 10 appearances and seven starts last spring. The coaching staff is also hoping for bigger things from sophomore Alex Lakatos, who had a 2-2 record with a 6.69 ERA while also hitting at a .258 clip as an outfielder.

"I think Brandon Sinnery took off this fall from where he was last year," Maloney said. "He looks pretty good right now. Bobby Brosnahan seems to have recovered from last season really well and in the fall looked pretty impressive. Alex Lakatos started to come out as well. We're using him more as a pitcher to really let him develop. If he can raise the consistency level, he could be outstanding."

The Maize and Blue also could receive contributions from several freshman pitchers. Righthanders James Bourque, a hometown product who played at Huron High School in Ann Arbor, Matt Ogden, a product of Smoky Hill High in Aurora, Colo., and Ryan Gallagher, who hails from Cardinal Mooney High in Boardman, Ohio, made positive impressions on the coaching staff in the fall.

"I thought James Bourque pitched well and really opened our eyes to the potential of him giving us some quality innings this year," Maloney said. "We were encouraged by that. Hopefully he'll continue to get better and be able to make an impact. Matt Ogden has an outstanding outpitch, which was really nice to see, so I thought he did a nice job. I thought Ryan Gallagher showed some signs as well of helping us this season."

The Wolverines are deep at catcher, with six receivers listed on the pre-season roster. Senior Coley Crank not only handles duties behind the plate but also saw action in left field and at designated hitter last year while pacing Michigan with 17 doubles, seven home runs, 33 RBI, 92 total bases, a .474 slugging percentage and a .373 on-base percentage. Sophomores Cole Martin and Zach Johnson made 24 and 16 starts, respectively, at catcher but hit just .229 and .175. The freshmen include Kevin White from Charlottesville, Va., and Dominic Jamett from University Liggett School in Grosse Pointe Woods, Mich.

Michigan's infield is expected to be a team strength in 2011 with the return of senior third baseman John Lorenz and junior shortstop Derek Dennis. As a sophomore in 2010, Lorenz was named to the All-Big Ten tournament team and led the Big Ten with 12 doubles in conference games. He saw his batting average dip to .224 as a junior



Alex Lakatos



Bobby Brosnahan

Brandon Sinnery



Kyle Clark

while driving in 24 runs. Dennis also struggled at the plate by hitting .216 and missed three weeks during conference play due to an injury.

"I thought John Lorenz came in the best shape of his career," Maloney said. "He really came back on a mission. I thought he played great defense and he started to swing the bat like he is capable. That was encouraging. I think Derek Dennis, the last two weeks when he was finally healthy, started to play very, very well and that's encouraging. I believe your stars have to play like stars. It's time for Derek to be the star he wants to be and we need him to be. It was encouraging to see him take some steps that were really favorable. We started seeing a more consistent approach at the plate that I hadn't seen before so I'm encouraged by that."

Sophomore Brett Winger should see additional activity at first base after making 19 starts at the position and hitting .294 overall last season. Junior Kevin Krantz could see time at second base after making starts at seven different positions a year ago. One of the leading freshman candidates expected to see his name in the starting lineup is Dylan Delaney, from Woodland Hills, Calif.

"One of the guys that stood out to me was Dylan Delaney, the shortstop/second baseman from California," Maloney said. "He hit the ball well; he hit the ball hard throughout the fall. He sometimes didn't get the results, but, boy, he showed some bat speed. He made all the routine plays and that's what we're looking for. He was very consistent, which was encouraging. I think Dylan stood out."

Another freshman who could start early in his collegiate career is Will Drake, an outfielder from Fairfield, Ohio. He could share some time in left field with Crank, who is expected to see most of his time at catcher. The garden is expected to be a strength of the Wolverines, who also have sophomore Michael O'Neill and junior Patrick Biondi. O'Neill garnered Freshman All-America honors from Louisville Slugger and was a second-team All-Big Ten selection in 2011 while leading the conference with 30 stolen bases and hitting a team-best .307 with 29 RBI. Biondi joined O'Neill on the second-team all-conference squad while hitting .286 with 21 RBI and placing second on the circuit with 27 steals.

"I thought Patrick Biondi was our leading hitter in the fall," Maloney said. "I think his Cape (Cod League) experience really helped him and I think he's ready to go, which is awesome. I think Will Drake played really well. Will actually hit for a pretty high average this fall and did what he needs to do to be successful, which is spray the ball around the field and run the bases. He played a decent outfield in left by using his speed, which complements Patrick Biondi and Michael O'Neill very well out there."

As evidenced by the current Michigan roster, Maloney and his staff recruit players from throughout the country. There are challenges for many northern schools in convincing players from the West, Southwest or Southeast to depart their warm-weather states to play in colder regions, such as Michigan and the Big Ten. According to Maloney, the Wolverines have an advantage over many colleges and universities based in the North because of the reputation the Ann Arbor institution has garnered in athletics and academics.

"There are a lot of people from all over the world

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who want to come to Michigan," Maloney said. "It's expensive to attend Michigan from out of state, and with the scholarship limitations at the Division I level, that makes it very challenging. There are not full scholarships or as much money floating around our sport like there are perhaps in other sports. Putting together a financial package that makes it affordable for a player to attend school here is tough. But on the flipside, we will on occasion get a young man who is willing to pay more than he might elsewhere simply because he wants to get that Michigan education."

Outdoor practice time prior to the start of the season is another hurdle Michigan and other northern schools must clear. That same situation leads to numerous road trips during the first month or so of every season. For example, in 2012, the Wolverines play their first 20 games on the road, including two trips to Florida and one each to Louisiana and South Carolina. That can make life difficult not only on the field but in the classroom as well for the student-athletes.

"The first four or five weeks of our season are spent on the road because of the weather," Maloney said. "It's challenging, but it's fun too. In the history of college baseball, 62 percent of games are won by the home team, and if you factor in only the top 75 teams, that figure increases to 79 percent. But one of the great things we can offer our student-athletes is the opportunity to see many of the great college campuses in other parts of the country.

"Playing college baseball, especially in the north, is certainly not for the faint of heart. When we're traveling every year to play in warmer weather, we're leaving on Thursday and returning around midnight on Sunday. They have to be in class on Monday morning, which is their off-day for baseball, but we're leaving again on Thursday. That's a lot of missed class time at any college, so it's a challenge. They have to be very organized and really on top of their studies. It can be done, but it's difficult."

Those challenges notwithstanding, Maloney realizes his Wolverine team will be tested this season while trying to get back to its winning ways. Even though schools in the Big Ten rarely receive props for their baseball programs, the conference is one of the nation's more competitive from top to bottom. Every weekend during league play is a battle, which will only intensify with the recent addition of Nebraska to the circuit.

"The Big Ten may not get the attention that other conferences around the country receive, but we have some schools with great baseball programs and traditions," Maloney said. "John Anderson at Minnesota has put together some excellent teams. Ohio State saw their legendary coach, Bob Todd, retire after last season, and Coach Todd had many great seasons. I think the changes that were made in the 1980s that cut off the regionalization of college baseball really hurt the northern schools and their chances of getting to the College World Series. Notre Dame broke that trend



about 10 years ago, but the truth is there are a lot of very good college teams in the North. There are a lot of great coaches and a lot of outstanding players who have gone on to the major leagues after getting their starts by playing college baseball in northern conferences like the Big Ten. And, most importantly, there are a lot of great kids getting great educations in the north who are doing some amazing things outside of their sport."

Snow may cover the ground while the Wolverines prepare for their opening month of the 2012 season, but that in no way limits the enthusiasm Maloney has in terms of getting his guys ready to take the field. He knows the skies will clear as they have since 1866, which will give Michigan fans another season of excitement on the diamond. Adding to that legacy is Maloney's primary goal, beginning with a team that he feels has an opportunity to accomplish more than what many observers might expect.

"I'm excited about our attitude and how hard our guys have worked from a strength training standpoint to better themselves," Maloney said. "I'm also excited to have some of our guys who were hurt back and to see what they can do. I guess the fun thing about coaching is that each team is a little different. Our job as coaches is to find the right things to say and do to motivate the players to play even better than their talent dictates. That's my goal, and I'm looking forward to seeing what these guys can accomplish."