

Jeff Mielcarek

From: William Laney, editor [wlaney@wapakwdn.com]
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To: Jeff Mielcarek

By WILLIAM LANEY

Managing Editor

Two local baseball players, both bound for major college play, helped Ohio make it to the Heartland Classic championship for only the third time in tournament history and the first time in 15 years.

Wapakoneta High School graduate Johnny Crawford and Minster High School graduate Adam Niemeyer joined the pitching staff of Team Ohio in the eight-team tournament in Norman, Okla. — pitting the best players from the baseball rich states of Florida, Georgia and Texas as well as Arkansas, Colorado, Maryland and Oklahoma. The Ohio squad was coached by Jeff Mielcarek, who is the varsity coach of the Toledo Central Catholic Fighting Irish. His team no-hit the Defiance Bulldogs in the state tournament but Central Catholic lost 1-0 to standout pitcher Rob Ziegler when Defiance scored on a walk and an error.

Mielcarek, who had his own pitching ace in Jake Rudnicki at Toledo Central Catholic, said he was impressed with the play of Crawford, who is bound for Bowling Green State University to play for the Falcons, and Niemeyer, who is bound for The Ohio State University to play for the Buckeyes.

“Neither of the two players made all tournament team, but they both had solid weeks of play,” Mielcarek said on Sunday. “Adam pitched twice and he got a win against Georgia and he closed out the game against Texas where he pitched two scoreless innings — he was very good yesterday (Saturday).

“We took Johnny down as a pitcher but we also used him as an outfielder because of the way our team was made up and we saved him until the Friday quarterfinal game and he pitched and got the win against Colorado,” the long-time baseball coach said. “He pitched five innings and we beat them in six. He also hit about .300 so he had a solid week in the field and at the plate. They both did a nice job.”

The team started in round-robin play and beat Colorado, 4-3, before losing to Oklahoma, 6-5, and Texas, 14-3. The squad then rolled off three wins, with a 7-4 win against Georgia followed by a 10-4 win against Maryland and a 12-2 win against Arkansas.

The 4-2 record seeded Ohio third in the tournament where they beat Colorado, 16-3, and won Friday, 7-6, against Oklahoma, to earn the right to play Texas in the championship on Saturday. They lost 6-0 in the championship game to the Texas squad to finish second in the Heartland Classic, which started 33 years ago.

“We got off to a slow start on Tuesday, we were 1-1 and really kind of played sloppy,” Mielcarek said, “but then we were much better on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday and played some solid baseball against some good people.

“We just didn’t get the big hits against Texas,” he said. “We had the bases loaded in the first inning with one out and we didn’t get the big hit which is what we were doing the previous three days. We had the bases loaded in the seventh and we hit a shot right at an outfielder — if we get that up a little bit we score some runs.”

Crawford impressed Mielcarek. He pitched four innings against Colorado and gave up five hits and three runs, all earned. He also struck out six.

“We only got to see Johnny on the mound once, but he gave us a quality start and I think he also has a bright future on the mound at Bowling Green,” Mielcarek said. “I think he has a bright future on the mound and wherever else they play him.”

Crawford also hit 3-for-11 for a .272 average. He was 2-for-4 against Arkansas with an RBI and a run scored.

“I loved every minute of it,” Crawford said. “I got to go last year, too, and it is quite a trip and between last year and this year they were probably the two best weeks of my life.”

The first-team All-Ohio player as a junior and honorable mention as a senior said the trip is a humbling experience.

"You get picked for this team and you think you have a little bit of talent and then you go down there and you see players getting drafted out of high school, with this amazing ability and it humbles you," Crawford said. "It also makes you want to strive to get a lot better."

During his win against Colorado, he set a tournament record with four strikeouts in one inning.

"Overall, I thought I played pretty well," the 2013 WHS graduate said. "Some of the pitchers down there are extremely tough."

When he compared the talent there to the high school action in the area, Crawford struggled but then said, "The high school guys here will have a lot of talent, but they just a little more ability and they do the little things like holding runners on and the runners are better at stealing a base. The first thing that went through my head was this is what college ball is going to be like."

Niemeyer also impressed Mielcarek.

"I think he has a huge upside," Mielcarek said of the future Buckeye. "I don't know if he is the guy that will jump in their and be a weekend guy his first year, but I think by the time he is a sophomore or a junior that he is going to be really special."

Niemeyer, who was part of a Minster team that won a state championship in 2011 and 2012, embraced the memories made by playing for Ohio.

"The entire experience was a blast," Niemeyer said. "We get to stay with a host family for the week, which most of the players do, and they were awesome and that was a great experience."

"The competition there was just through the roof," the Wildcat standout said. "The teams that were there were all very good and very well coached."

Spending the week in Norman, Okla., Niemeyer used the opportunity to learn more about himself on the mound.

He pitched 5 1/3 innings against a strong Georgia team giving up eight hits and two runs, both earned. He struck out three.

He pitched in relief against Texas and pitched two solid innings, striking out two and issuing one walk. He did not give up a hit.

"I learned I can compete with anyone," Niemeyer said. "I went out there and pitched pretty well against some of the top players from Georgia and Texas. It was good to know that I could compete with the best of the best."

"I also learned to get ahead of batters is the No. 1 priority and a good change-up can help anyone out," he said. Comparing his high school days with the week at the Heartland Classic, Niemeyer noticed a difference.

"The MAC is a really good baseball conference, but the teams out there are on a whole new level because every guy was going to college to play baseball and you can tell a lot of them work on baseball all year round and baseball only," Niemeyer said. "Around here the competition around is still very good, but the kids time is divided by playing other sports and not just baseball."

Mielcarek said they team took a bus from Columbus to Norman, Okla. to start the week and returned Sunday on the same bus route.

"The bus was pretty rowdy on the way home," Mielcarek said. "It was a good experience and they had a lot of fun."

William Laney
Managing Editor
Wapakoneta Daily News
P.O. Box 389
520 Industrial Drive
Ph. 419-739-3515
Fax 419-738-5352
wlaney@wapakwdn.com

BASEBALL**4 locals help Ohio to 2nd place****BY STEVE JUNGA**
BLADE SPORTS WRITER

Four recent high school graduates each contributed to the runner-up finish for Team Ohio in the 36th annual Heartland Baseball Classic in Oklahoma last Tuesday through Saturday.

One of the four — Whitmer's Luke Hickey — was a relatively late addition to the 20-player roster selected by Team Ohio head coach Jeff Mielcarek, the longtime Central Catholic coach.

Hickey made the most of his chance, batting .444 (8-for-18) during the team's nine-game run, and was one of four Team Ohio players selected to the Heartland Classic's all-tournament team.

"The experience was much more than just finishing as runner-up," said Hickey. "Going into it, you didn't know any of the guys, except for the local guys who were on the team. It's crazy how you can go from not knowing guys to becoming a super tight family.

"That was the most exciting part for me. We got hot at the right time and really formed together well. Same for me — I got hot at the right time and was helpful in us becoming runners-up. I took great pride in it."

The other local players were pitchers Jordan Grosjean of Clay and Jake Rudnicki of Central, and infielder Judah Wollenburg of Ottawa Hills.

During the six-game pool-play portion of the tourney, Ohio defeated Colorado (4-3), Georgia (7-4), Maryland (10-4), and Arkansas (12-2), and lost to host Oklahoma (6-5) and eventual champion Texas (13-3).

In the quarterfinals, Ohio topped Colorado again (16-3), and in the semifinals avenged the earlier loss to Oklahoma by holding on late for a 7-6 win.

Grosjean, who will pitch at Central Michigan, exited with a 5-1 lead in the seventh inning in the pool-play loss to Oklahoma, and earned a save in the semifinal victory over Oklahoma. He was a Three Rivers Athletic Conference co-player of the year this past season.

Rudnicki, who will pitch at Ohio University, earned the win in the first Colorado game, and was the losing pitcher in the 6-0 loss to Texas in Saturday's championship game played at Norman High School. He was also an All-TRAC first-team selection, and was picked to the Division II All-Ohio first team.

In addition to his solid hitting and errorless play at shortstop and third base, Hickey, who will play at Bluffton University, also pitched five innings to get the mercy-rule win over Arkansas.

"Luke took advantage of the opportunity he got early in the week, and then he never came out of the lineup," Mielcarek said. "He got a chance and performed at a high level right from the start.

"Both Jordan and Jake pitched like people around here have seen them pitch the last few years."

Wollenburg, who will play at Eastern Michigan, started games at three different infield positions.

"To be honest, this experience — meeting all of those guys and all of those [host] families — is right up there for me tied with getting to that state championship [basketball] game with Whitmer," said Hickey, who was a starting guard on the Panthers' 2012 Division I state runner-up basketball team. "Those are once-in-a-lifetime experiences, and I will never forget them."

Mielcarek served his seventh year as Team Ohio's organizer and head coach.

"It was one of the better finishes we've ever had," Mielcarek said of Team Ohio, which was also runner-up in 1990 and 1998 when this event was called the Sunbelt Classic. "We played very well Tuesday through Friday, and the experience for the kids outside the field was about equal to the experience they had on the field.

"Our local kids played an integral part in our success, both on the mound and offensively. The level of play is incredible, even with some of the teams that struggled. You're not walking out and beating anybody just because you showed up. It's a very high level of play with lots of Division-I [college] signees throughout the tournament."

Former longtime Team Ohio head coach Mike O'Reilly, who was formerly the head coach at Southview and St. John's Jesuit, returned to the staff as the team's third base coach this year.

Contact Steve Junga at: sjunga@theblade.com, or 419-724-6461 or on Twitter@JungaBlade.

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