



the game-changers of

Duke

Editorial and photos submitted by Chris Cook- Duke Sports Information

In every level of baseball, from little league to the big leagues, power arms, power bats and fleet-footed base runners grab all of the attention. Players who can hit it a mile, light up a radar gun or steal bases at will – most of which are products of natural talent – are often deemed “game-changers” or “next-level talent.”

Players who can field the ball, and field it well, however, are often overlooked, but can have just as big of an impact on the game.

Led by fifth-year head coach Sean McNally, the Duke baseball team has fielded a lineup full of such defensive specialists. Consequently, that group has earned the Duke baseball program the reputation as one of the best defensive teams in Division I baseball.

For the second straight year in 2009, the Blue Devils finished among the top five nationally in fielding percentage after leading all Division I teams in the category in 2008. In 2009, Duke's .979 fielding percentage – which broke last season's school-record fielding clip of .978 – ranked fourth in the country, ahead of such powerhouses as Texas (.976), UC Irvine (.976), Cal State-Fullerton (.976) and LSU (.974). With just 47 errors in 59 games in 2009, Duke was the only ACC team to finish with more double plays (54) than errors.

“The analogy I use all the time – though it's not my analogy – is that defense is like the white noise of the game,” McNally said. “It's an underrated and critical element of the game and, to me, the most important ele-



Head Coach Sean McNally



Ryan McCurdy



Jeremy Gould

ment and the thing I'm probably most passionate about."

Recruiting strong defensive players was a point of emphasis for McNally, who has posted a career record of 116-107-1 at his alma mater with two consecutive 30-win seasons and a 15-15 ACC record in 2009.

"What we generally look for first [when evaluating players] is how fast the guy is and how he swings the bat, but then what his arm strength is," said McNally, who was an All-ACC third baseman at Duke and played nine seasons in the minor leagues. "That's really hard in the evaluation process because you don't get to see a guy over an extended period, day in and day out, with how he's going to catch the ball. With some of our guys, we've had a good idea, but on others we've been fortunate to get some guys who have proven to be good in that regard. It's also a buy-in; it's about getting kids who are really passionate about this aspect of the game."

In 2008 and 2009, Duke's lineup was made up of four of the ACC's best defensive infielders, a Johnny Bench Award semifinalist behind the plate and a Rawlings Gold Glove winner in the outfield. Starting third baseman Ryan McCurdy, now a senior, has led ACC third basemen in fielding percentage for two straight seasons, while junior shortstop Jake Lemmerman has finished among the top three at his position in each of his first two years.

In 2010, Duke will have a new look on the field, but still hopes to win with a foundation of solid defense and pitching. Lemmerman, who was named to the ACC All-Tournament team as a sophomore, and sophomore center fielder Will Piwnica-Worms remain the only starters who will return to their primary positions. Gone are 6-8 first baseman Nate Freiman and catcher Matt Williams, both of which were four-year starters who graduated in 2009 and are now playing



Gabriel Saade

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professional baseball. Duke will also be without Rawlings Gold Glove right fielder Alex Hassan, who was drafted as a junior and is now playing in the Boston Red Sox organization.

But just as defense is one of Duke's biggest strengths, so is versatility. McCurdy, who has played third base, second base and shortstop during his three years as a Blue Devil, moved from third base to catcher during the fall and has already locked down the starting job behind the plate. Outfielder Jeremy Gould, who is Duke's best returning hitter with a career .337 average, will take over the starting gig at first base, while Gabriel Saade will move to the outfield to ease the loss of Hassan. The position changes open the door for another crop of defensively sound freshmen, including infielders Marcus Stroman and Eric Brady, who are the favorites to take over at second base and third base. The remaining outfield positions could be split between sophomores Joe Pedevillano and Brian Litwin, freshman Mike Carroll and Saade.

Even as Duke has established itself as one of the best defensive teams in the nation, however, the Blue Devils are still not satisfied.

"My big thing is that we always want to keep moving forward," McNally said. "I really didn't want our guys to settle in and say 'Wow, we're really good defensively.' We wanted to raise the bar, and one of the areas where we were not particularly good [in



Jake Lemmerman



Will Piwnica-Worms

2009] was turning double plays. There's a lot of things that factor into that, but that's something we really worked on in the fall is turning double plays and the relay game. In both of those areas, we worked on them all fall and leading up to the season and got much better at both."

But while the Georgia Tech's, South Carolina's and Miami's of college baseball are annually lauded for being among the nation's leaders in home runs, batting average and strikeouts, Duke's defensive accomplishments have gone largely unnoticed. While the statistics are certainly in Duke's favor, what may be even more telling of the defense's impact is the performance of the pitching staff.

"The luxury of pitching at Duke is that you know the defense will field the ball cleanly and throw it accurately across the infield," said fourth-year pitching coach Sean Snedeker, whose 2008 Duke staff finished sixth in the nation with a 3.71 ERA. "That keeps pitch limits low and allows our pitchers, when they're behind in the count, to keep attacking the hitter and pounding the strike zone."

In their first three years together at Duke, Snedeker and McNally have built a pitching staff that relies largely on pitchability and sound defense – the two ingredients that McNally pegged as "crucial" to turning Duke baseball into a competitive ACC program when he began his career at Duke in 2006.

The strategy worked. After inheriting a program that went a combined 121-214 in six years before his arrival, McNally and his staff have turned Duke into one of the up-and-coming teams in college baseball. The Blue Devils finished 35-24 in 2009, won the series against No. 1 North Carolina and No. 7 Georgia Tech, and just missed making an NCAA Regional for the first time since 1961.