

The Keys to Corvallis

Oregon State's Run to the Top Fueled by Pitching and Defense

Editorial and photos provided by
Hank Hager - OSU Sports Information

The old adage goes that offense wins games, but defense and pitching win championships.

That theorem has been at the base of baseball statistics and lore for years, and as there's no way to accurately confirm it, it has stayed active in the culture of the sport.

If you ask any Oregon State baseball fan, though, it's a mantra that certainly has its place in the sport.

And why not? Oregon State has built a mini baseball dynasty in Corvallis based on the principle that defense and pitching are a solid backbone to a successful program.

"Coach (Pat) Casey has made comments in the past that pitching and defense will win ball games, the offense will just tell you by how much or how little," said Oregon State pitching coach Nate Yeskie. "You can score a run without having to get a base hit. Walk, bunt him over, wild pitch; now he's on third and a sac fly to center field, the team really didn't have to do anything to earn that run."

The Beavers used a strong pitching corps and one of the nation's best defenses to make three consecutive trips to Omaha and win back-to-back national titles in 2006 and 2007.

In turn, OSU effectively turned the college baseball world on its head and established the Beavers as one of the top programs in the nation.

"Oregon State's shocking rise to the top of the college baseball world in the middle of the last decade changed the landscape of the sport forever," Baseball America's Aaron Fitt was quoted as saying in

the March issue of Oregon State Baseball's Gameday Magazine.

"No longer is Omaha the exclusive domain of the warm-weather traditional powers. The Beavers empowered upstarts like Fresno State and proved to older cold-weather

schools that the impossible is, in fact, possible. Oregon State's remarkable run to back-to-back national titles stands out as the biggest college baseball story of the modern 64-team era, and one of the greatest in the sport's history."

Sure, the Beavers sprinkled in a consistent offense during those seasons, and continue to do so today, utilizing bunts, sacrifices and timely and smart baserunning. Those are considered the fundamental ways to play the game, and why should the offense be any different.

Pitching, however, has been a focal point at Oregon State and will continue to be one for as long as members of the Oregon State coaching staff reside in Corvallis.

In 2005, the first of three consecutive years in Omaha, the beavers finished with an earned run average of 3.06, the fourth-best mark for the program since 1967. The Beavers rode that ERA – and a team batting average of .316 – to the postseason.

A year later, Oregon State's ERA rose slightly – to 3.41 – but Oregon State finished with eight shutouts, signifying that OSU's staff was dominating when it needed to be.

Case in point: OSU threw a combined five shutouts in the Pac-10 and the postseason, including two straight victories over Rice that propelled the Beavers into the title series against North Carolina. If Rice had been able to score at any point during those games, it might be the Owls who celebrated the national championship in 2006 instead of the Beavers.

The next year? That figure rose again slightly, to 3.48, a tally

Greg Peavey



Tanner Robles



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that, when compared to 2005 was astronomical, but in reality, was more than respectable, especially when compared to other programs around the nation.

But then in 2008, the Beavers hit a bump and missed the postseason for the first time since 2004. Their ERA that year? That would be 5.29, and the staff finished with just two shutouts. OSU finished with a 28-24 record and narrowly missed a berth to an NCAA Regional.

Point proven, especially after OSU returned to the postseason in 2009 with a 3.93 ERA.

"I think that any time you're trying to put something together, to use a cooking analogy, there are ingredients," Yeskie said. "The ingredients for our success during my time here have been the commitment to doing things right in the weight room, doing things right from just a structural standpoint with having a plan in place with a throwing program."

Yeskie, now in his second year as Oregon State's pitching coach, has made a significant mark on the program since joining the club prior to 2009. A five-year veteran of the professional game – he pitched for the Minnesota Twins organization in the late '90s – Yeskie is a student of the game, and approaches it that way.

He also demands that the pitchers on his staff work hard and work smart. They'll do many of the same things he did while in the Minor Leagues, and new techniques that have become more commonplace in the game today.

After all, many, if not all, of Oregon State's pitchers have aspirations of playing professionally.

"Coach (Yeskie) understands the game, by relating to all of his pitchers," said sophomore Sam Gaviglio. "He has been through it all, which helps him to relate to us."

Yeskie wants his pitchers to throw strikes. That's key as walks can be killer to a pitching staff, and over time, can cost teams games, especially in one- and two-run contests.

"I think it can be summarized by two things," Yeskie said. "One, I heard a comment years ago that came from Andy Lopez of Arizona that it's '9-on-1.' There are nine defenders and one guy on the offensive side so already you're at an advantage. It only takes three strikes to get a guy out and sometimes only one, opposed to four balls. You can't defend the walks.

"The last part to add perspective to it is the thing that baseball guys talk about all the time, and that is that if you fail 7-out-of-10 times, you're still considered successful. So knowing that failure is part of the offensive side of things, you can eliminate the walks and now you are really condensing the offensive opportunity to have success."

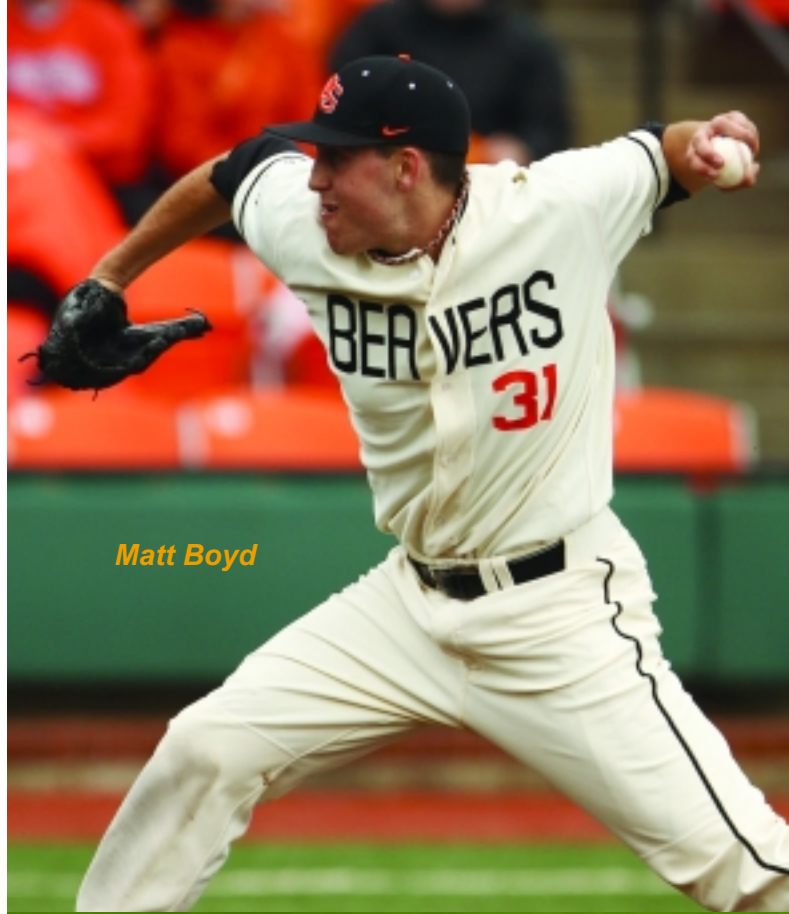
That's key No. 1. But being smart on the mound and doing things fundamentally – there's that word again – plays a big part in being successful. That means practicing "PFPs", or pitcher's fielding practice as it is called, plays a key role in the pitching staff's daily practice routine.

"I've spoken to many clinics and camps," Yeskie said. "The one thing I always try and close with is, I have a slide at the end of my powerpoint presentation that says 'If the little things are the things that win and lose ball games then aren't they really the big things?'"

The Beavers have never lacked for talent on the mound. Seven pitchers who threw at least one inning from 2005-07 for OSU will pitch professionally in 2010.

Of the 16 pitchers on the staff this season, seven have been drafted by Major League clubs before, including Kraig Sitton, who was selected in the 17th round of the 2009 MLB First-Year Player Draft by Boston but who decided it was better for him to return for his junior campaign.

"I feel like every staff in the country has had someone drafted," said junior Greg Peavey, already a two-time Pac-10 Pitcher of the



Matt Boyd



Keith Jennette

Tyler Smith



Carter Bell

Week honoree this season. "But what really sets us apart is how well we get along with each other."

Pitching certainly has been at the forefront of Oregon State's success, and with the plethora of numbers that has been shown above, there is no reason for it not to be. But look deeper, and the team's defense can certainly make a statement on its own.

Lees has molded the team's defense into one of the best on the West Coast, if not the nation. Now in his ninth season – and first as the team's associate head coach – Lees has become popular in coaching circles because of it.

"I think one reason that our defense is good is we do have good players," Lees said. "We put a lot of time into defense just like a lot of things. One of the things that really helps is that during the winter when there are some teams that have bad weather, we have facilities that let us go indoors.

"There is a sense of pride looking to the guy to the left and right of you that you are in this together and we feed off these guys locking hands and being one defense. It's also engrained in their heads that they will play defense to get on the field and when you have the pitching that we do that rolls a lot of ground balls, it's important that we take advantage of that."

"The coaches have a really good program with the way they want to do things and the way we attack on defense," countered junior middle infielder Keith Jennette, who is in his first season at Oregon State. "We have a really good mindset on defense, probably the best in the country. When we are on defense, we all know what's going on, and have each others' back. For a double play, when Ty (Tyler Smith) is there for a turn, I know that he will always be there."

Lees has a simple approach to the way the team plays defense, and as someone who speaks at many clinics and camps, his philosophy is passed along often.

Basically, defense can be a simple aspect of the game of baseball if coaches and players allow it to be.

"I just think that a lot of people make it tougher than what it already is," he said. "Really, less is more and you need to be good at the routine hit. Every time it is hit to you in a routine fashion, it has to be an out."

This past season, 2009, Oregon State's defense posted a .977 fielding percentage, good to rank in the top 10 nationally and No. 2 in the Pac-10. Believe it or not, the defense actually improved as Pac-10 play started, and OSU also finished second in the league with a 9.78 per-

centage.

Those numbers come in a string of seasons that shows Lees' tutelage of the team's defense is top notch.

In 2008, OSU finished 15th with a .973 percentage. The year before that, OSU was second with a figure of a .977, and in 2006, the Beavers were eighth at .975.

There's no way of getting around it: The Beavers play fundamental baseball, in every way possible, and the numbers are there to show it.

"The work ethic that we put in," is a big reason for that, said sophomore infielder Carter Bell. "You don't win ball games without defense. The dedication and time that we put into each day, I think it's one of the best, if not the best in the country. So that is why I always think we are up there in the defensive ranking, and we take pride in defense."

It's often that you'll find Oregon State players getting in early work before practice. Just about every day, they're on the field 30 minutes early, hitting one another grounders and fly balls. Lees is out there showing the team's newcomers the proper fundamentals – footwork and arm angles, among other things – and OSU's student-athletes take in every word as though it was gospel.

After all, why not? Like Yeskie, Lees has worked with some of the finer collegiate baseball players on the West Coast. Top Chicago Cubs' prospect Darwin Barney played college baseball at OSU, and was one named the Fielder of the Year in the Pac-10.

He was joined by Mitch Canham, a promising catching prospect in San Diego's organization, as well as Boston Red Sox outfielder Jacoby Ellsbury, who once patrolled center and right at Goss Stadium.

Don't forget about Joey Wong, who began his professional career with the Colorado Rockies organization last season, and Ryan Ortiz, who, as a catcher, was selected by Oakland in the sixth round after throwing out better than 30 percent of the runners attempting to steal against him his junior year.

What does this mean for fans who watch Oregon State baseball on a regular basis, or players who someday aspire to be an Oregon State student-athlete? Get ready to watch the game it was meant to be played, and be prepared to work hard to play a fundamental brand of ball.