

WESTERN NEVADA

EXPERIENCES QUICK SUCCESS AND STELLAR 2010 SEASON

by Bill Ballew



Baseball doesn't have a long legacy at Western Nevada College. After all, the Carson City school, which opened in 1971, did not take the diamond until 2006. Yet the accomplishments the Wildcats have accumulated in that short amount of time under head coach D.J. Whittemore have made his team a perennial power, even in the ultra-competitive Scenic West Athletic Conference.

The Wildcats burst onto the baseball scene during their inaugural season by posting an overall record of 37-18. The school debuted by sweeping a doubleheader against Glendale and Southern Nevada on January 27 in Henderson, Nevada, by scores of 4-2 and 6-3, respectively. From there Western won the Scenic West Conference championship, which featured four teams ranked in the National Junior College Athletic Association top 20, one of which was the Wildcats. In addition to being a new team, WNC shocked opponents and other observers by winning with a squad that featured only two sophomores, with the rest being freshmen.

"I really give the credit to the rise of our program to the quality of the other schools and their programs in our conference," Whittemore said. "If we didn't get real good real fast, we were going to get beat up a whole bunch. I guess it was out of fear as much as anything as to why we pushed the accelerator and became competitive real fast. We knew going into it that we would face some of the country's top teams eight times a year, and if we weren't ready to play at a high level, that would make for some long seasons."

As exciting as the team's debut campaign may have been, the 2007 slate proved to be even better. The Wildcats made their presence on the national map felt by winning eight straight road games to emerge as Region XVIII and Western District champions, which led to an invitation to the NJCAA World Series. Western proceeded to win two games, among them a victory



Coach D.J. Whittemore

over the nation's top-ranked team, New Mexico Junior College, and finished the season fifth in the country while posting an overall mark of 41-24-2.

Western fielded another young team in 2008 after many of the players from the previous season received opportunities to play at four-year schools or in professional baseball. Nevertheless, the freshman-dominated class helped guide the Wildcats to a second-place finish in the Scenic West Conference and advance to the finals of the Region XVIII tournament. A year later, in 2009, the more experienced players established the school record with 48 victories in a season and wound up hosting their first super regional and second regional tournament. The Wildcats notched three championships, including the Scenic West Conference, the Region XVIII and the Western District, and wound up third in the nation after dropping two games in the NJCAA World Series to eventual champion Howard College of Texas.

"Every year other than this season we've gotten off to miserable



Jordan Lewis

starts,” said Whittemore, whose team posted a 46-8 record after beginning last year with only two wins in eight outings. “There are a variety of reasons behind that, including the baseball season starting in the middle of winter. We’re up here at 4900 feet and we get snow and it’s cold and it’s tough to practice. It’s tough to get ready for the start of the season, especially when we usually play our first 16 to 20 games on the road. Our scheduling philosophy is to play the best teams in the country in order to be the best, so it’s easy to see why we get beat early in the season. We started 2-6 in 2007 as well as last year and we went to the World Series both times. Rough starts are to be expected when you’re from Carson City and you’re playing against teams from Arizona and Southern California. But we believe that as long as you’re learning while you’re losing, that can be a good thing.”

The Wildcats’ success on the field has generated an impressive amount of pride throughout the campus, yet that paled in comparison to the accomplishments achieved by the players. While the sophomores on the 2009 squad combined to win 86 games, all 11 members of the class received scholarships to four-year schools. Eight of those are now attending NCAA Division I programs. Ten of the 11 players graduated in two years, and eight departed with grade point averages well above 3.0.

In order to accomplish such feats on the field and in the classroom, Whittemore and his staff must be selective during the recruiting process, even with an annual turnover rate of the roster of approximately 65 percent. The head coach admits that character as well as a desire to earn a degree are traits he looks for in a student-athlete. Those simply searching for a springboard for their baseball careers are advised to attend school elsewhere.

“I learned our first year how important chemistry is in terms of our success,” said Whittemore, who was named Western District Coach of the Year in 2007 and 2009. “You hear the old

saying about the sum of the whole being greater than the sum of the individual parts, but until you experience that it’s hard to believe it’s true to the degree that it is. The challenge is even greater at this level because of the time-consuming efforts associated with recruiting and then building chemistry and teaching leadership each year. As a result, each team we’ve had here has been special in its own right and been forced to find its own way.

“I really believe the success we’ve had this year as well as our first four-and-a-half seasons is due to the type of player we have targeted. We really go after good students and good teammates as much as we do good players. That’s really been fundamental to our success. We’re looking for people who know how to make good choices and are self-motivated, unselfish, coachable, intelligent and competitive. Sometimes those people aren’t the best players or athletes, but those are the guys we think succeed best in our program.”

The frequent turnover of talent at the junior college level is the biggest challenge for coaches who aim to keep their programs competitive on an annual basis. Whittemore has been able to find that unique balance, as evidenced by the Wildcats’ performance thus far in the 2010 season. After getting off to a strong start, Western hit a few bumps in the road by dropping three of four versus Southern Nevada on March 12-13 and then splitting a four-game series with Southern Idaho on March 19-20.

Frustrated with their record residing at 18-9, the Wildcats dug deep and reeled off 12 straight wins. Western welcomed first-place Salt Lake Community College to Carson City, with the Bruins riding a 15-game win streak, including an 11-0 mark in conference play, and ranking 12th in the nation. The Wildcats wound up sweeping the four games from Salt Lake, with pitcher Kramer Champlin setting the tone with a seven-inning complete game and 10 strikeouts.

“After the last two losses, we wanted to make a strong statement to get the season back on track,” said Champlin, who owned a 7-1 record with a 1.48 ERA through his first 11 outings, including seven starts.

The Wildcats then took on Colorado Northwestern on April 2-3 and Eastern Utah on April 9-10 and once again swept both four-game series to improve to 30-9 on the slate. Pitching, as has been the case since the program began, served as the key. In addition to Champlin’s stellar efforts, Western received consistent performances from Jake Waardenburg (5-2, 2.40 ERA in his first 10 starts), Jeremy Gendlek (6-1, 2.90 ERA in nine games and eight starts), and Tim Peterson (3-1, 2.32 ERA in eight outings and four starts). Pitching coach Kevin Edwards has been impressed with the way the hurlers have responded to minor adjustments and taken their performances to higher levels as the season has progressed.

“Our pitching staff this year is statistically the best one we’ve ever had,” said Whittemore, whose staff owned a 2.57 ERA through its first 39 games. “That’s saying



Brooks Klein

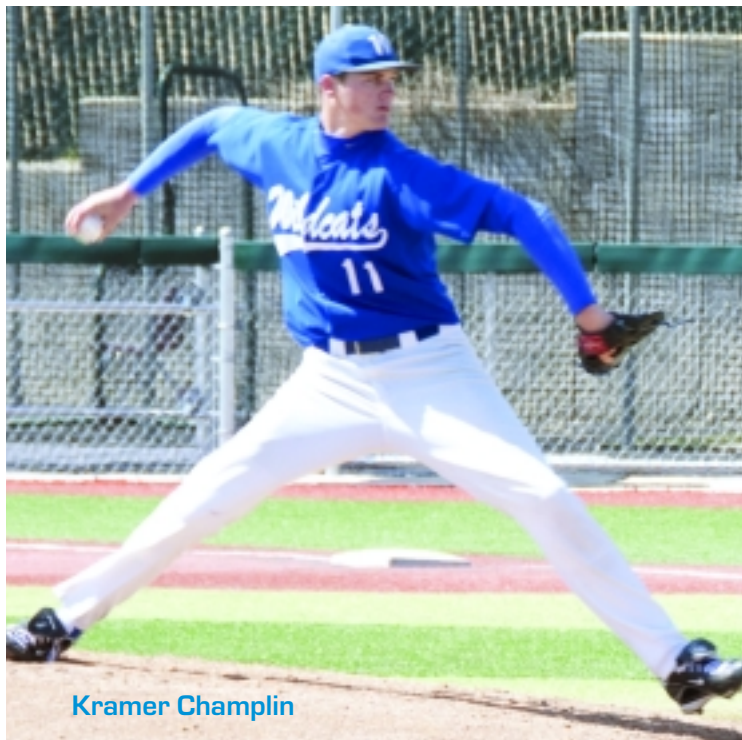
WESTERN NEVADA

EXPERIENCES QUICK SUCCESS AND STELLAR 2010 SEASON

something when you consider that after our first year we had five pitchers sign professional contracts. This year's pitching staff doesn't strike out as many guys or have the lowest opponents' batting average, but they are the hardest team to score on. We've allowed only 2.6 runs per game so far this year, including only 2.2 runs in conference games. When the program was conceived, our idea was to build it around pitching and defense. We've been fortunate enough to recruit and develop some pretty good pitchers in our program."

There also has been no shortage of offense, with the Wildcats outscoring their opponents by a 267-104 margin while hitting .286 as a team compared to .221 for the opposition. Kyle Conwell began the slate by batting at a .331 clip with nine doubles and 31 RBI and tying for the top spot with four home runs. Kevin Taylor added a .302 norm with seven doubles, three triples, three homers and 27 RBI, and Brooks Klein contributed 10 doubles, four round-trippers and 24 RBI. Speed is also an essential ingredient on the team, with Jay Skilton, a .341 hitter with a .524 on-base percentage, succeeding on 20 of his initial 21 stolen-base attempts, while Trevor Goff also swiped 20 bags in his first 21 theft tries.

"We've had a very balanced attack since the program's inception and I believe that's a testament to our hitting coach, Aaron Demosthenes, because he coaches every single player on the team," said Whittemore. "He doesn't just coach the best hitter or only the starting nine. He coaches everyone every single day. We take a lot of pride in spreading our reps around where a lot of people can and do contribute to win a ball



Kramer Champlin

game. A prime example earlier this season came when Andrew Garcia drove in two runs even though he was a guy who was near the bottom in terms of batting average. On any given day any player can step up and help us win."

In spite of the team's remarkable accomplishments of the recent past, many believe the 2010 team may be the best Wildcat squad in the school's short history. Whittemore knows that assessment cannot be accurately made until after everything is said and done, but admits he likes Western's chances heading into the campaign's crunch time. The team's chemistry is as good as it gets, and the coaching staff, which also includes assistants Joe Hooft and Jerahmie Libke in addition to Demosthenes and Edwards, is dedicated to getting the most out of every player's talent.

"I'm so grateful to be able to coach baseball in this program," Whittemore said. "I'm grateful for the assistant coaches who are giving up their lives to help me build this program. I feel really lucky to be around some incredible young men who are really teaching me how to be a better person. To see their dedication in the classroom and the results they've accomplished on the field makes all the hours we've put into making the program a success an outstanding and rewarding experience."



Andrew Garcia

