



PURPLE WAVE OF HORNERD FROGS LEAVES T-C-WHO? IN THE PAST

By Bill Ballew; Photos provided by TCU Sports Information

When Taylor Featherston arrived on the campus of Texas Christian University for the first time as a student in the fall of 2008, the baseball program was established and known among the locals, but was little more than a curiosity to the masses. The following spring, when Featherston and the Horned Frogs advanced to the Super Regionals and won the second game at Texas, the team was deemed an underdog, with many labeling their efforts a fluke.

"I went up to the Cape (Cod League) that summer and I had people ask me if TCU was in Texas and if we were any good," Featherston said. "I looked at our team and I knew we had the ability to achieve some incredible things, but no one ever really gave us any credit."

After concluding the 2009 season ranked 11th in the nation, the Horned Frogs took a major leap on the national map by not only becoming one of nine schools to repeat as Super Regional participants in 2010, but advancing to the sport's grandest stage in the College World Series. TCU, whose 54 victories ranked second at the Division I level this past spring, went 3-2 in Omaha and fell one game shy of advancing to the championship round.

Those accomplishments have led to TCU becoming one of the most popular programs in college baseball. Combine that with the school's football team, which was also ranked among the nation's top 10 during the opening weeks of the 2010 slate, and Horned Frog fever is an epidemic spreading well beyond the university's student population of 8,700.

"It's incredible now how many College World Series shirts you see

around campus and even people wearing TCU baseball jerseys," Featherston said. "People tell you 'great job,' and pat you on the back. With the success the baseball team and football team are having, it's like the school is blowing up. You can't even park on campus because the school is such a hot commodity. I think that's great because I believe the baseball team has had a part in the incredible growth and popularity of the school."

The current environment is exactly what Jim Schlossnagle envisioned when he accepted the TCU baseball reins prior to the 2003-04 school year. The head coach realized the school had not been committed consistently to the diamond game but was encouraged by what he saw. For instance, Lupton Baseball Stadium and Williams-Reilly Field was dedicated in the spring of 2003, giving the program a state-of-the-art on-campus facility that seats 3,500 in a unique two-deck structure. Schlossnagle also spoke with numerous people throughout the Fort Worth community and discovered an underlying passion for the game that could blossom like a Texas rose if given the proper attention.

"Every year since I arrived everyone has been so supportive and the fan base has been growing," said Schlossnagle, who was the head coach at UNLV for two years prior to his arrival at TCU. "We've always been preaching Omaha, and to finally get there by beating an in-state rival (Texas) and then playing really well there, it was kind of a relief to honor a commitment that so many people had made over such a long period of time. It was a dream come true to see all of those people in Omaha walking around with TCU shirts and cheering our team on with a lot of pride."



Taylor Featherston



Brance Rivera

Of course, it didn't hurt the team's popularity, at least from a local standpoint, when winning became a consistent outcome upon Schlossnagle's arrival. In his first year at the dugout helm, in 2004, TCU posted 39 wins, a school record at the time, won its first-ever Conference USA tournament title, and appeared in its first NCAA Regional since 1994, and third overall.

Forty-one wins along with a second straight C-USA tournament crown and spot in the NCAA Regionals followed in 2005. A shift to the Mountain West Conference for the 2006 campaign brought with it the Horned Frogs' first outright regular-season MWC title and their third straight NCAA Tournament appearance. Conference regular-season and tournament championships were accrued again in both 2007 and

2008, all of which set the stage for the program's ascent onto the national spotlight over the past two seasons.

The team's winning ways have been accomplished via a variety of factors, headed by the impressive recruiting efforts of associate head coach Todd Whitting. TCU's 2004 recruiting class was ranked third in the nation by Baseball America magazine, while four of the last six have been considered top 10-caliber classes by at least one major publication. During that stretch the Horned Frogs have garnered a reputation for being one of the tougher schools in the country from which professional teams can lure incoming freshmen.

"TCU has always been a great school, and my goal since

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I've been here is to have the baseball program reach the level of the university in terms of academics and reputation," Schlossnagle said. "We're a private school and we're trying to emulate the great programs like Rice and Stanford. Our goal is be in on the very best students who are also the very best baseball players. When you recruit those kinds of kids, in order for Major League Baseball to get them, they usually have to draft them high and give them a really good signing bonus."

But even that potent combination is no guarantee professional baseball will get its man. The most notable example involves Matt Purke, a left-handed pitcher from Klein, Texas, who was taken in the first round with the 14th overall selection by the Texas Rangers. Teams with one of the first 13 choices were cautious because of Purke's commitment to TCU, and the Rangers found out the hard way when the talented twirler turned down a signing bonus worth a reported \$4 million in order to become a Horned Frog.

"This was the right situation for me," Purke said. "I weighed the pros and cons and felt like TCU was the best place. I've been a hundred percent since I made the decision. I love the family atmosphere we have here. Fort Worth is a great city, and the community is always behind us. Our coaching staff is phenomenal. They've done wonders with all of us, and Coach Schloss does a great job of getting us ready to go. I knew this program was competing at a high level and that I could win a national championship here. There's been no looking back, and I'm looking forward to the future here."

The same aspects that attracted Purke also lured Featherston to Fort Worth. The shortstop narrowed his options to several schools in the Southeastern Conference as well as Texas A&M before deciding to become a Horned Frog. Featherston said the school's reputation preceded it as a great institution in which to play baseball, and that fact became obvious during his official visit to the campus.

"Coach Whitting was a big reason I came here, and I loved Coach Schloss right off the bat," Featherston said. "I also wanted to be a part of a first, the first team to go to Omaha, which I was. Now I want to be part of the first team to win a national championship. It's unbelievable to watch how this team has changed in the past two years. This team is extremely deep, and we have great fans who are really behind us. It's just a great atmosphere to play college baseball."

The combination of a strong commitment to academics and baseball is obvious in the classroom and on the field. In addition to being one of just 14 schools to make seven straight appearances in the NCAA Regionals, TCU also fields one of the country's more talented teams of student-athletes. For example, in the spring of 2008, the Horned Frogs had a team grade-point average of 3.12. The squad's combined GPA for the 2007-08 academic year was 3.07, with 23 members posting a 3.0 or better.

In order to achieve success in the classroom and on the field, the TCU players must be organized and diligent. Yet, according to Schlossnagle, the one trait he demands more than anything from his Frogs is energy.

"We really pride ourselves in controlling the things we can control," Schlossnagle said. "The two things we preach that you can control is your effort and your attitude. Some of the best emails I have received since the College World Series are from fans and high school coaches and other people in the baseball industry who said they were so impressed with how hard our kids played, showing the energy and aggressiveness for what I consider to be the right way to play. We work on those things every day. That's how we practice. To get to Omaha and have a chance to showcase that on television really helped justify what we do every day."

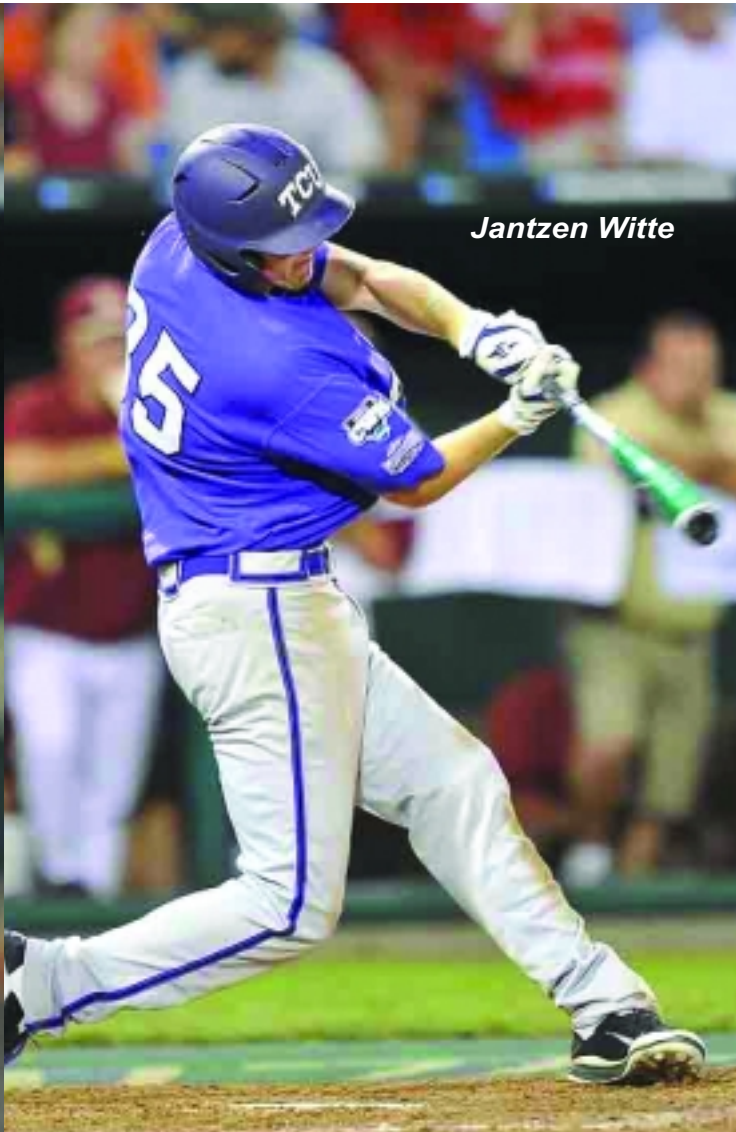
The team's energy was obvious from the first pitch on Opening Day through the final out in Omaha. The Frogs won eight of their first nine and 15 of their initial 17



Jerome Pena

contests. TCU also finished on a strong note by going 14-2 from April 30 through their championship in the MWC Tournament. After sweeping three games in the Fort Worth Regional, the Frogs outlasted the Longhorns in the Austin Super Regional by taking two of three from one of college baseball's premier programs.

Their strong play continued into Omaha, where the Horned Frogs were adopted as the favorite among the locals at Rosenblatt Stadium. TCU won its first-ever CWS game by defeating Florida State, 8-1. After losing their second contest to UCLA, 6-3, the Frogs showed their



Jantzen Witte



Justin Coats

resiliency and determination while posting victories over the Seminoles and Bruins prior to being eliminated in the last semi-final contest by UCLA.

"That was really amazing and unexpected," Schlossnagle said of the local fan support his team received. "I knew that of all the teams there, since we were the (only) first-time team, that people were going to cheer for us. We had no idea how passionate the support was going to be. The night of the opening ceremonies when they introduced all eight teams, we were the only one to get a standing ovation. From that point forward, regardless of where we went, it was a baseball paradise in terms of the way people treated us."

For years members of the TCU team envisioned what playing in Omaha would entail. Suffice it to say that to a player they were blown away. The reality far exceeded their expectations, which made the trip even more special for everyone involved.

"It was more than I ever expected," Purke said. "That place is something different. Omaha does a really good job of bringing all of these teams in and taking care of everybody. They do a great job of getting the fan base to come out and watch baseball. We were kind of the hometown favorite, which made it even better."

Added Featherston, "It was everything and more. From the hundreds of people who asked you for your autograph every day to police escorts, it was unbelievable. We ate breakfast with Barry Bonds and all of the ESPN people. The people that worked at the hotel would line up and cheer us on when we'd get on the bus. The entire experience, both on the field and off, was awesome."

The only facet the team left unfinished was winning the national

championship. With six of the eight starting position players returning as well as the weekend starting rotation that includes Purke, Kyle Winkler and Steven Maxwell, the Horned Frogs should be strong contenders once again in 2011.

"The game begins and ends with starting pitching," Schlossnagle said. "In my opinion, if you're great everywhere else but your starting pitching is suspect, it's always going to be an uphill battle. That doesn't mean you can't get hot and play well at the right time. But if you can run out a starting pitcher that's at least as good as what the other team is going to put on the mound, then you're always going to have a chance. We have our entire weekend rotation back. We did lose three very important

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pieces to our bullpen that graduated last year, but returning our rotation is a great start for us. If we can find a way to keep those guys healthy and strong and performing at a high level, we'll always have a chance."

Maxwell was a 12th-round draft pick of the Minnesota Twins in June who decided to return to Fort Worth for his senior season. Maxwell led the weekend rotation with a 2.70 ERA while posting an 11-2 record. Purke registered an amazing 16-0 record with a 3.02 ERA in 20 outings, while Winkler went 12-3 with a 3.39 ERA in 19 starts.

Three-fourths of the infield remains intact with second baseman Jerome Pena (.313, 11 homers, 52 RBI), third baseman Jantzen Witte (.374 with 39 RBI) and Featherston (.338, 52 RBI). Justin Coats (a team-high .361 average and 69 RBI with 13 homers), Aaron Schultz (.293, 9 homers, 53 RBI) and Brance Rivera (.342, 6 homers, 28 RBI) return to the garden, from left to right, respectively.

The keys for Schlossnagle will be finding replacements for catcher Bryan Holaday and first baseman Matt Curry. The Horned Frogs have several candidates to fill the voids, but the head coach realizes others will have to step up with some of the intangibles.

"Replacing Bryan Holaday and Matt Curry equates to 35 home runs and a lot of leadership," Schlossnagle said. "Holaday was the Johnny Bench Award winner, so losing an elite catcher like that is hard, but I believe we have two guys in place here that are doing a great job and are going to handle our pitching staff well."

The stellar starting pitching and the impressive amount of returning experi-



Kyle Winkler

ence should find TCU ranked at or near the top of the national rankings when the first polls are released in late December. Such expectations should not bother the Horned Frog players, who have similar dreams for themselves.

"My goal is to get this team back to the College World Series," Featherston said. "This season will be a year when we have a bunch of guys who are draft eligible. If everyone does his part, then the pro stuff will take care of itself. In the meantime, Schloss has not let us think about the past at all. We lost our catcher and first baseman, but we have a bunch of guys back, including all three arms in the starting rotation and some freshman pitchers that look a little salty, which is a good sign. We're going to try to get back after being one step away from winning the whole thing."



Matt Purke

In the world of college baseball, it wasn't that long ago when people asked, "TC who?" That's ancient history today, a fact the team realizes will lead to every regular-season opponent looking to take down one of the new national championship contenders. Being the hunted instead of the hunter is fine with the Frogs, who have worked long and hard to make that scenario a reality.

"We felt like we were the best team last season and we were determined to prove ourselves," Featherston said. "That's why I came to this school. It's always better to achieve something that's never been there than to hop on a team that's there every year. But in some ways we're still proving to the people who are blind to the purple wave that's coming on that we're here to stay."

"Like all coaches I wish it would have happened years before because I'm a very impatient person when it comes to winning," Schlossnagle said. "You want all that stuff to happen yesterday, not tomorrow. There are steps a program has to go through to get to that point, and we are one of only 14 schools that has been to seven consecutive NCAA tournaments. Every year you get a better idea of what you need to do. Even in 2009, when we went on the road for the Super Regional and lost to Texas, that was a good learning experience for us. It certainly set us up to be better for 2010. We're excited, but the work has just begun. We want to stay at that level, but we realize it will require a lot of hard work and good fortune."