

'Berg Baseball: It's in the details

By Morgan Hawley - Heidelberg University Sports Information



What drives a student-athlete to succeed? What fuels a player to become part of a team? For Heidelberg University baseball, a multi-layered passion drives the program. Individually, team members are committed to doing the day-to-day things right in the classroom, in the community, in practice and with their families.

As a team, they share a desire to do great things, a dedication to details and a willingness to put their teammates first.

These passions will continue to carry the Berg to new heights in the 2011 campaign.

Matt Palm is in his 12th year in the dugout and his focus has not changed since he moved to Tiffin, Ohio and took over the program in 2000. "We have been successful because of the great student-athletes that are coming to campus. They are doing the right things and they have their eyes set on success across the board, not just on winning. Since they do such a great job off the field as well, it has made the whole process fun."

Over the last eleven years, Heidelberg has emerged as one of the premier programs in NCAA Division III baseball. The program has a 70.2 winning percentage and is the four-time defending Ohio Athletic Conference Champion. Since 2000, Heidelberg has won at least 23 games each year, eclipsing the 30-win plateau on six occasions and finished with a record-setting 42-8 campaign in 2010, besting its mark of 41 wins in 2008. They have been the top-seed of the Mideast Regional three years running.

It would be safe to describe Heidelberg as a winning program, but ask anyone on campus and they will tell you that does not define the team. For Heidelberg baseball, winning is simply the reward for doing the day-to-day things right.

"Over the years our goals as a program have remained intact," said Palm. "We start with the conference level, go to the tournament, which gets you to Regionals, then ultimately competing for a national championship in Appleton. I think too many times you get goal oriented as far as the final place you want to be and you forget about the stuff that really got you there. That is what we do ... really focus on the daily things."

The program's unheralded success has not gone unnoticed. Last year, Heidelberg ranked as high as No. 2 in the nation in the D3Baseball.com poll. A year later, the team has moved up a spot and is heading into 2011 as the top team. The No. 1 ranking is a



Head Coach Matt Palm

first for any athletic program at Heidelberg, but the rankings are preseason and in the words of All-American right fielder Ricardo Lizcano "It's a new year. Last year was last year, preseason is preseason, and we need to focus on right now. Go out and play hard and the rest will fall into place."

A SEASON AGO

Heidelberg is coming off a year of capturing both the Ohio Athletic Conference Regular Season and Tournament trophies, along with winning its first Mideast Regional and making

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its first appearance at the NCAA Division III Baseball Championship.

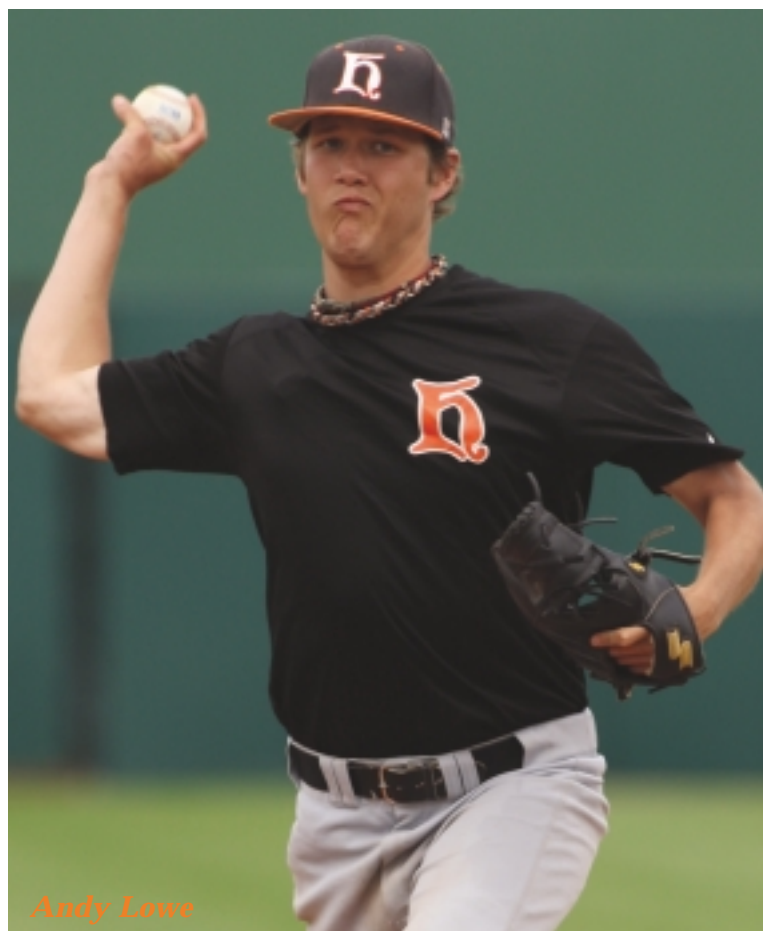
"Last season was unbelievable," said Palm. "The competition in this region, the OAC, is remarkable. To win the regular season and tournament and go to our rival's field and beat them to go to Appleton is just something we are very proud of. In Appleton, we played extremely well, we were in every ballgame, but in the end it just did not work out for us to win a national championship. We had good team chemistry, did good things on and off the field that made the season special."

Extending its season was not without challenges. Seven games into its OAC schedule Heidelberg was sitting with a 4-3 record. In the past it was rare for a team with more than three league losses to make it to the conference tournament.

The team looked inward and outward, and landed on the conviction they had developed in each other when their backs were against the wall. "We trusted each other to get us through tough situations," said All-American short stop Jason Lash. "Our lineup – one through nine – we know anybody can get it done. If one guy is struggling, the next guy will pick us up. That is one of the main things that Coach Palm has instilled in us is to trust each other to do the little things."

After dropping game one of a doubleheader to league-rival Marietta College, Heidelberg responded with home runs by Gar Keen and Lash in the ninth inning to lead to a win. More impressive was the pitching of closer Andy Lowe. Lowe came out of the bullpen in the second inning to lead the way for the win. The win over Marietta ignited an eleven-game conference winning streak that led to Heidelberg's fourth consecutive, fifth overall, OAC Regular Season title.

Its winning ways in the postseason came with excitement. Heidelberg opened the OAC Tournament as the top-seed versus Muskingum University and set new tournament game records for hits with 32 and runs scored in a 29-5 win. The win streak grew to fourteen after securing the OAC Tournament championship, beating the Marietta Pioneers twice more, once in an early round and once in the championship.



Their victory earned them an automatic bid to the NCAA Mideast Regional.

Heidelberg took advantage of being the high seed at the seven-team regional and went through the winner's bracket en route to the trophy. After winning in the bottom of the ninth in their first game of the regional against Adrian College, Heidelberg went on to beat the host Pioneers for the third time in the postseason sending them to Appleton and the NCAA Division III Baseball Championship.

At the championships, game one pitted No. 2 Heidelberg against top-ranked Johns Hopkins University. Heidelberg came out on top before dropping a game to eventual national champion Illinois Wesleyan University. 1-1, with their backs against the wall, Heidelberg topped the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point in an elimination game. Their time in Appleton concluded when they lost to Linfield College, two games short of the championship.

Great senior leadership guided the program last year. All-American catcher Steve Decker and pitcher Everett Thomas pushed to keep their teammates working. Their ability to lead will be missed, but as the saying goes, the cupboard is far from bare.

"With any great program, the names change, but the results don't," said Palm. "We are excited about what we have with our senior class this year and are we are looking forward to see where they will lead us."

A NEW YEAR

Heidelberg returns seven starting position players, four starting pitchers and its top closer in 2011.

Leading the way is the veteran infield. Up the middle, the senior All-American combination of Lash at shortstop and Keen at second base has started all but one game since stepping on campus. Not far off at the hot corner is All-American Willie Brechun, who moved into the starting line up midway through his freshman season. And rounding out the infield is first baseman Derek Andrzejczak, who is coming off his junior year as a full-





Jason Lash



Ricardo Lizcano

time starter.

Palm feels that veteran experience will carry the infield a long way this year. "There are not many situations that this infield has not been in. They all play relaxed because they are experienced, which will assist with the transition for sophomore catcher Jordan Martin. This established group will help with the leadership on the field."

The entire outfield returns. "We have four guys that will be in the game, whether it's in the outfield or in the designated hitter spot in the lineup," said Palm. "Bottom line is that they are all offensive players, but what makes us so good is that they are tremendous defensive players. We are not just sending someone out there for offense."

Lizcano returns as an All-American to right field and is the reigning Mideast Region and the OAC Jack Rafeld Player of the Year. He led the team in a host of statistical categories as a sophomore and is poised to continue his strong presence in the outfield, as well as in the leadoff spot. Seniors Alex Monroe and Andrew Buelow return in left and center field, respectively, while junior utility Elvin Williams provides added depth. Williams also spends time in the pitching rotation.

Sophomore right-hander Ethan Holt returns as the No. 1 pitcher. Senior right-handers Brian Koehl and Nathan James and junior right-hander Sylvester Nino also return to the starting rotation. "This group all has good stuff," said Palm. "They command the zone and give us a chance to win everyday."

Mainstays out of the bullpen for middle relief are senior left-hander Brandon Stucky and junior right-hander Daniel Brannum.

"Our starters do a great job, but what helps separate us is bringing in one of the best pitchers in Division III baseball into the game when it is winning time," said Palm. "It's not necessarily the end, but when our starting pitchers are potentially out of gas, whether it's two innings, seven innings, Andy Lowe has done the job for us. That gives a coach great confidence to know you have a guy coming in that has been dominating."

Lowe is in his final campaign at Heidelberg and returns as the two-time OAC Kent Tekulve Pitcher of the Year and the Mideast Region Pitcher of the Year. He is an All-American right-hander who has set a new single season saves record each year on his way to being the career leader.

"The entire pitching staff is extremely comfortable with our infield and outfield," said James. "This year we are stressing focus. If we stay focused we will get it done." And James is a great example of getting things done. Last year he received the inaugural NCAA Elite 88 Award for baseball, which honors the student-athlete with the highest grade-point average of the competing schools in each of the 88 NCAA sponsored championships.

A FAMILY

Heidelberg is not simply assuming they will make a return trip to Appleton, they are putting in hard work to earn the right to be there. It is not just working as individuals that has developed this program into a winning tradition, but it is the support that surrounds them as well.

"It is incredible the fan support that we have from everyone, our families, friends, the community and the campus," said Brechun. "It is hard to describe the feeling to know that we are loved so much by others."



Ethan Holt

TEAM SPOTLIGHT

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Willie Brechun

Buelow added "We are a family. There is not a better word to describe what we have, off and on the field."

Heidelberg baseball is a family that works together for success. "We work hard to find the right players and families," said Palm. "They will do things the way we expect them to off the field and on, based off of a great support structure at home, from teammates, friends and people at Heidelberg. I was raised to put family first and foremost. Family was one thing that was going to get us where we needed to be. It's the model that works for us."

The entire family feels the highs and lows that a season can bring. If Heidelberg is facing a tough situation a glance around the stands will provide some motivation. Down, or tied, late in the game Heidelberg fans will bring out their rally Twizzlers to help bring home a win.

"The Twizzlers work more often than not because we have a great group of guys that don't panic and they continue to play," said Palm. "Since I have been here we have had some great closers and when you are not giving up runs late, but still capable of scoring and getting into other people's bullpens, it makes the Twizzlers look pretty good."

No one in the Heidelberg baseball family assumes success. Instead they understand that it is earned by doing the day-to-day things right. In the end, it is not the individual honors that matter to the student-athletes, it is where the team is following the OAC regular season, the OAC Tournament, the Midwest Regional and the NCAA Division III Baseball Championship.

"Our passion we have is going to help us bring it all together," said Keen. And when you ask the senior class what they want to do this year they will simple say, in unison, "Finish."

HEIDELBERG UNIVERSITY BASEBALL PLAYER ACCOLADES

Ricardo Lizcano (Junior Right Field): 2011 D3Baseball.com Preseason All-American; 2010 D3Baseball.com and ABCA All-American; 2010 ABCA Midwest Region Player of the Year; 2010 ABCA Midwest Region First Team; 2010 OAC Jack Rafeld Player of the Year; 2010 OAC First Team;

Willie Brechun (Senior Third Baseman): 2011 D3Baseball.com Preseason All-American; 2010 D3Baseball.com and ABCA All-American; 2010, 2008 ABCA Midwest Region First Team; 2010 OAC First Team; 2010 Academic All-OAC; 2009 OAC Honorable Mention;

Jason Lash (Senior Shortstop): 2010 ABCA All-American; 2010 ABCA Midwest Region First Team; 2010, 2009, 2008 OAC First Team; 2010, 2009 Academic All-District; 2010, 2009 Academic All-OAC; 2009 ABCA Midwest Region Third Team;

Gar Keen (Senior Second Baseman): 2010 ABCA Midwest Region Second Team; 2010, 2009, 2008 OAC First Team; 2009 D3Baseball.com and ABCA All-American; 2009 ABCA Midwest Region First Team;

Andy Lowe (Senior Right-Handed Closer): 2011 D3Baseball.com Preseason All-American; 2010, 2009 D3Baseball.com and ABCA All-American; 2010 Midwest Region Pitcher of the Year; 2010, 2009 Midwest Region First Team; 2010, 2009 OAC Kent Tekulve Pitcher of the Year; 2010, 2009 OAC First Team; 2010 Academic All-District; 2010 Academic All-OAC; 2008 ABCA Midwest Region Third Team; 2008 OAC Honorable Mention;

Ethan Holt (Sophomore Right-Handed Pitcher): 2011 D3Baseball.com Preseason All-American; 2010 Midwest Region First Team; 2010 OAC First Team;

Matt Palm (Head Coach) 2000-present (12th season): 345-146-2 (.702) overall in 11 seasons; 140-55-1 (.717) in OAC in 11 seasons; 2010 ABCA Midwest Region Coach of the Year; 2010, 2009, 2008, 2004, 2000 OAC Coach of the Year; 2010 NCAA Baseball Championship appearance; 2010 Midwest Regional Champions; 2010, 2009, 2008, 2007, 2003 OAC Regular Season Champions; 2010, 2009, 2008, 2004 OAC Tournament Champions; 2010, 2009, 2008, 2004 Midwest Regional appearances.

