

# BRASHEARS, VAN SICKLER LOOKING TO TAKE SHENANDOAH TO THE PROMISED LAND

By Bill Ballew

There was a time in the not-too-distant past when facing the Shenandoah Hornets on the diamond created something less than fear and trembling among their opponents. In fact, several members of the university's 2011 squad remember well when a date with the member of the USA South Conference served as a panacea for any ills the competition might have been experiencing during the course of a campaign.

"My freshman year, many teams played Shenandoah in order to get a win," said senior pitcher/first baseman/left fielder Greg Van Sickler. "This year's senior class, we remember how we were kind of a joke when we were freshmen."

Van Sickler's recollections are valid, even if they are somewhat exaggerated. After all, numerous teams would settle for a 20-20 overall record and a 5-7 mark in conference play, which is what the Hornets produced during the 2008 campaign. At the same time, that performance is a far cry from what Shenandoah has been able to produce in each of the past three seasons.

In 2009, the Hornets shocked many observers by advancing to Fox Cities Stadium for the Division III College World Series in Appleton, Wis. The team repeated the feat in 2010 before reaching new heights during the 2011 slate. Shenandoah climbed to the top of the D-III charts for the first time in program history prior to entering post-season play with a 31-4 record, including an 11-1 mark in regular-season conference competition to win the USA South. The lone flaw occurred when the Hornets wound up losing in the championship game of the USA South Conference Tournament, 5-4, to fourth-ranked Christopher Newport on April 17.

Though disappointed with the result of the conference tournament, which cost the Hornets an automatic bid, they headed into regional competition as one of the schools receiving an at-large bid to post-season play. It might even be said that the loss to Christopher Newport served as a wake up call after Shenandoah had been ranked number one in the first two national polls in April.

"We need to continue to work hard and not take our foot off the pedal," senior outfielder Kevin Brashears said. "We need to continue to do everything we can to move forward and believe that good things will happen if we go about our business in the right way. We also need to play as a unit and maintain the chemistry we have. If we do that, we should go pretty far."

Chemistry is a strength of the Hornets, and it has nothing to do with the team's knowledge of the sciences. Instead, Shenandoah has 11 seniors on its roster, with each player contributing in various ways. Van Sickler and Brashears are captains as well as leading contributors from a statistical standpoint. A two-way standout, Van Sickler led the 2011 Hornets in batting average (.413) and RBI (36) as well as on the mound with nine wins, a 1.71 ERA

and 58 strikeouts. Brashears, the team's center fielder, topped Shenandoah with 13 stolen bases while ranking second with a .400 batting average and 35 RBI.

Fellow seniors Brian Goddard (5-0, 3.00 ERA) and Ben Hendrickson (5-0,



*Kevin Brashears*

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2.74 ERA) have been mainstays while joining Van Sickler in the rotation. Outfielder Mike Smith has contributed as a two-way player, hitting .280 with 14 RBI in between going 1-1 with a 3.33 ERA. Another fly catcher, Clint DeHaven, has been productive in the lineup by batting at a .283 clip with nine homers and 30 RBI.

Other players in their final seasons have not seen as much activity but have contributed in any manner asked by head coach Kevin Anderson. Both Brian Fream and Bobby Stefanowicz have had a handful of relief opportunities, while infielder Shea Roberson and Bryan Claudio have had virtually no playing time. Despite the varying degrees of game participation, the Shenandoah seniors have helped the Hornets become one of the most dominant teams at the D-III level.

"We have our ups and downs like everybody else but that's baseball," Brashears said. "This year the team is playing really well and the camaraderie we have is pretty special. That includes the guys who are and those who aren't playing a whole lot. The chemistry is so good here, and I think the coaching has a lot to do with that because of the type of kids they bring in. Being number one is special in its own right, but we want to be number one at the end of the year because that would mean we won the national title, which is the big goal we have."

Currently in his fifth season with the program, Brashears is the longest-tenured Hornet. The fleet-footed center fielder earned second-team All-America honors as a junior at St. Maria Goretti High School in Hagerstown, Md., while receiving all-area recognition in each of his last three campaigns. He played for his dad, Mike Brashears, who played basketball and pitched at the University of Maryland. Several Division I schools had interest in the younger Brashears following in his father's footsteps before the son decided to go a different route.

"My dad and I sat down and talked about it and he said to go where I wanted, especially if I wanted to play," Brashears said. "He stressed that I needed to go to a place where I thought I would be happy. Coach Anderson showed some interest, and my brother played basketball here at Shenandoah. Coach's first year here (2003-04), my brother put in a good word, telling him that I was interested in playing. I wanted to go to a place where I could play every day, and Coach Anderson said I would get the opportunity to prove myself. I'm so glad I came here, and I wouldn't trade it for anything. It's been a great experience, and I can't give Coach enough thanks for recruiting me and bringing me here."

Brashears' career at Shenandoah began on a difficult note. A catcher upon his arrival for the 2007 campaign, he experienced numbness and a lack of feeling in his right hand while throwing the ball. After making only two appearances as a true freshman, he wound up undergoing surgery to reposition the ulna nerve in his elbow. Granted a redshirt season, Brashears returned to the field in 2008 and batted .307 in 20 starts.

His productivity increased significantly in 2009 when the red-shirt sophomore moved to the outfield on a permanent basis and hit .393 with eight home runs and 50 RBI. He became more productive as the season progressed, culminating with USA South All-Tournament honors and the Most Outstanding Player award in the Salisbury Regional after hitting higher than .500 and pacing the Hornets with two home runs and 10 RBI.

"I always loved playing catcher because you're in on

every play and you need to have so much knowledge about the hitter in order to break them down and get them out," Brashears said. "But I also love taking away a hit from the batter and running down balls hit in the gap while being the leader of the outfield, so I didn't mind moving out there at all. I also believe I'm a better centerfielder because of my time at catcher. I have a good feeling about what pitches are going to be thrown, and I know how to play the percentages in the outfield, such as playing on the pull side or going the opposite way."

Considered to be the fastest player on the Hornets, Brashears earned numerous awards in 2010 while leading the team back to the D-III World Series. By hitting four home runs in the final two regular-season games of the year against Ferrum, Brashears concluded the slate by batting .562 for the week. After receiving first-team All-USA South honors for his efforts, he was then named USA South Tournament MVP thanks to his .475 batting average in five games. Academic All-District III and Gold Glove recognition also came his way, as did an invitation to play in the Valley League, a collegiate summer circuit where he played in both 2009 and 2010.

"Playing in the Valley League for two years, I played against a lot of guys from D-1 and D-II schools and I proved to myself that I can hang with them," Brashears said. "The only difference is they have Virginia Tech or Baylor or whatever after their names and I have Shenandoah. It gives me a lot of pride to have Shenandoah after my name because I know I made the right decision to come here."

Brashears continued to be one of the primary contributors to the Hornets in 2011, when he earned yet another spot on the USA South Conference All-Tournament team. He had 16 multi-hit outings in his first 30 games, including a pair of four-hit showings in a three-game stretch in early March. In addition to his performance on the field, he has tried to pass along what he has learned during his stint at Shenandoah by establishing the foundation with many underclassmen on the team.

"One of our guys, Keaton Neeb, our catcher, was playing on the same team in the Valley League and one of the coaches said to me, 'You're like his big brother, aren't you?'" Brashears said. "That was nice to hear because I try to help all of the guys who come in by taking them under my wing and giving them some of the knowledge I've acquired. I've been fortunate to experience some of the things I have here at Shenandoah and I want the guys who are going to take my place from a leadership standpoint to have everything they need to carry on the success we've had."

Joining Brashears on the Winchester, Va., campus in 2008 was Van Sickler, a local product from nearby Stephenson who was not as heavily recruited as the outfielder. A self-described "little kid, like 5-foot-10, who threw 82," Van Sickler became interested in attending Shenandoah after Anderson visited James Wood High School and spoke to the team during the player's senior year. The speech stoked Van Sickler's fire to play at the next level, even though interest in his services at the collegiate level had been nonexistent. Anderson, however, gave the young player with the burning desire to continue his baseball career while earning his business degree in hospital administration an opportunity to prove himself on the diamond.

Even though the Hornets had a veteran shortstop, the position Van Sickler played when not pitching, he wound up earning All-USA South honors at utility while taking the mound on occasion and going 3-4 with a 5.66 ERA. The freshman proceeded to hit at a .439 clip, which ranks as the fourth-highest single-season mark in school history, and was named the conference's Rookie of the Year. Despite his success with the bat, Van Sickler was not convinced of his future while standing in the box.

"Coach just expected me to pitch when I came here, although he gave me the chance to play during the fall," Van Sickler said. "I was able to have some success pitching and hitting and I went to Coach's office at the end of my freshman year and I told him I just wanted to focus on pitching. He told me no. That was pretty much the end of the conversation, and I'm glad he told me no because I've stuck with it ever since."

As a sophomore, Van Sickler led the league with 66 RBI, set the school record with 20 doubles, and batted .411 with seven home runs to receive third-team All-America honors at utility by the ABCA. He emerged as the Hornets' ace in the rotation, going 9-2 with a 2.69 ERA, including winning Shenandoah's opening game of the 2009 NCAA Championships with a seven-hitter against Farmingdale State.

"I love the fact that I am able to somewhat balance hitting and pitching,"



*Greg Van Sickler*

Van Sickler said. "I might like pitching a little more because I'm in control of the game. Nothing starts until I'm ready and decide to throw the ball. I also know I can do a lot more for the team on the mound than at the plate because like everybody else I get in slumps and can struggle while hitting. If I'm struggling with my hitting, I really focus on my pitching to help pick my team back up. But everything I've done on the field here has been fun."

The fun along with the success continued into his junior campaign when he earned Pitcher of the Year honors in the USA South as well as all-conference recognition at both utility and pitcher, becoming the first player in school history to garner two first-team accolades in the same season. He hit .412 with five homers and 55 RBI while rewriting the record book again with 27 doubles. His pitching also was outstanding, with Van Sickler going 8-3 with a 3.49 ERA.

In 2011, Van Sickler opened the season with a 21-game hitting streak and drove in two or more runs in six straight contests, between Feb. 27 and March 12. He allowed no or one earned run in six of his first nine starts on the bump, and was named to virtually every All-America squad as they were announced, beginning in April. Yet for all of the attention his output has received, Van Sickler says nothing tops his team's performance during his senior year.

"I'm not into individual awards, although it is nice when you get recognition, because I realize I don't achieve anything without the eight other guys playing behind me," Van Sickler said. "The thing I'm proudest of is the transformation that has occurred since my first year at Shenandoah and the fact that we've really helped put the school on the map. This year especially has been a special ride because we've done so well thus

far. My first season here, we were just mediocre, middle of the road. We seemed to turn things on like a light switch my sophomore and junior seasons while having a chance to go to the World Series two years in a row. That was a whirlwind experience. This year has been great because we have a special group of guys that should allow us to go far into the postseason."

When the Hornets met for the first time at the beginning of fall practice, Anderson told his team that the goal of this year's squad was to win the national championship. After reaching Appleton in each of the past two seasons yet failing to come away with the ultimate prize, Shenandoah and the Class of 2011 was lacking only the D-III World Series crown. By being ranked number one in April, the Hornets had a bulls-eye placed on their backs, which is something everyone in the program has grown accustomed to over the past three seasons.

"We feel like we can go far in the postseason if we play the baseball we are capable of playing in the postseason," Van Sickler said. "Yet regardless of what happens, coming to school here has been the greatest experience I could have had. Coach Anderson has taught me so much. I was kind of hot-headed coming out of high school and I thought I knew everything. I was a typical freshman, I guess. Coming here the first day, it was an eye-opening experience. The way he runs the organization here at Shenandoah is unlike any coach I had ever had. With him, I've witnessed first-hand how coaching can win games. It wasn't until I came here that I realized how much of an impact coaches can have on the game. He doesn't get a lot of credit for it, but there have been a ton of games we've won because of his decisions. Now we're just trying to put together that final run to get him and our school the one thing we haven't accomplished since I've been here."