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PG South: Pitching holds key to West Mifflin section title hopes

Thursday, April 30, 2009

By Chris Adamski, Tri-State Sports & News Service



John Heller/Post-Gazette

West Mifflin High School coach Jeff Kuzma has the Titans in the hunt for the WPIAL Section 4-AAA title.

The front page of the West Mifflin baseball team's official Web site is dotted with inspirational messages for the Titans players.

"Destiny is not a matter of chance. It is a matter of choice," it reads.

The section titles the team earned the previous two seasons are noted, with 2009 mentioned as a possible addition to that list.

Toward the bottom of the site's home page reads: "It's amazing what we will be able to accomplish, if no one cares who gets the credit."

That could apply neatly to the Titans' pitching staff, which is a five-member group that has combined to be a primary reason why West Mifflin controls its own destiny to win a third Section 4-AAA title in a row with one week remaining in the regular season.

The innings pitched for the four starters is roughly the same for each. And the "closer" is tied for the team lead in victories. Together, the unit has limited opposing offenses.

"Every pitcher on our staff is great," senior third baseman Mike Mroz said. "It doesn't matter

whom they face, they're not afraid of anyone. And it doesn't matter who's pitching, we have faith we can win with all of them."

Junior left-hander Jeff Zeigler, senior right-hander Bill Bendgen, senior left-hander Josh Dawida and junior right-hander John Pollock and Rick Olsz have combined to post a 4.00 ERA with 73 strikeouts in 90 innings.

The Titans were 10-5 overall and 7-2 in section play heading into yesterday's scheduled game against Yough. They trailed first-place Trinity (11-1, 8-1) by a game.

"We don't have a lot of guys blowing you out of the water with stats, but our pitchers find ways to win ballgames," West Mifflin coach Jeff Kuzma said.

Zeigler (2.42 ERA, 24 strikeouts in 221/3 innings), Bendgen (two wins, one save) and Dawida are each in their second season as starters. Pollock and Olsz are in their first seasons of pitching at the varsity level, and each was 3-1 before yesterday.

Olsz has taken on a role of finishing games. He has allowed only one earned run on only seven hits in 101/3 innings this season with 12 strikeouts.

"Their strength as a staff would have to be their ability to throw strikes," Kuzma said. "We don't have an overpowering lefty or right-hander as far as velocity, but our game is centered around these guys throwing strikes and hitting spots and knowing what to throw and when to throw certain pitches.

"They're very good with controlling around the zone. We tend to get a lot of groundballs. Those guys are consistently hitting their spots when they throw their pitches."

Of course, pitching is only one aspect of run prevention, and the Titans have strong defense behind their pitchers.

"I think our defense is one of the best in the WPIAL, in my opinion," Mroz said. "There's not a guy out there who can't field his position."

That group includes Mroz, junior shortstop Nick Miller, junior second baseman Kevin Quinn, senior first baseman Jesse Clayton, junior catcher Bill Hodgetts, junior left fielder Brian Ripper and senior center fielder Scott Commander. Olsz plays right field when he's not on the mound.

Mroz leads the team with a .410 batting average through Monday's victory against Thomas Jefferson. Ripper had 12 RBIs to lead the team, while Olsz (15) and Quinn (14) had scored the most runs.

Junior Brandon Costantino fills in at various places in the lineup and in the field and is second on the team in RBIs with 11.

The Titans went a combined 29-7 during the past two regular seasons (23-5 in section play). But that didn't translate into postseason success either time. West Mifflin lost its first playoff game in each of the past two seasons.

Changing that, more than anything, is the first priority when it comes to goals for the remainder of the season.

"Our goals for the rest of the season definitely are to win the section [title], then we'll try to win states -- but first we know we have to win a playoff game," Mroz said. "We haven't been doing that.

"We've accomplished a lot the past few years, but need to break through and win a playoff game when we get there.

"If we can do that, get over that hump, hopefully that will get us going and we can make a run at states."

First published on April 30, 2009 at 12:00 am