

Mississippi College baseball off to strong start

By Mike Christensen

After winning thirteen of its first fifteen games, Mississippi College popped up in the Top 25 of the National Collegiate Baseball Writers' NCAA Division II poll on March 8.

It had been a while. MC's last national ranking was in 2010, when it was an NCAA Division III school. The move to Division II—and back into the highly competitive Gulf South Conference—began shortly thereafter, and it was turbulent at times.

The Choctaws went 4-28 in GSC play in 2015 and 7-25 in 2016, which was current coach Jeremy Haworth's first season. MC went 15-17 in conference last year and won five of its first six this season.

Haworth said he was happy to see the team's progress—and hard work—rewarded with a spot in the national poll, but he was more concerned about what would follow.

"Sustaining success is always harder than building it up," he said. "I don't know how the guys will feel about it. Hopefully, they'll keep moving on."

All signs were good.

"We are playing really well," Haworth said, heading into the Lee University series March 9-10 at Frierson Field. "Hitting well, pitching well... We played very good defense early on, but we've struggled with that a little lately.



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The Mississippi College baseball team has started their season off on a strong note.

"I think some guys were putting too much pressure on themselves... They need to play under control and play to have fun. That's when we play better."

A year ago around this time, the Choctaws were mired in a deep funk. They were 2-17 and winless in the league. They were getting early leads but not holding them. Fun, it wasn't.

"We decided to flop some of the [starting pitchers] with the bullpen guys, change their roles," Haworth said. "We put some of the softer throwers at the front and put the starters at the back end. When we did that, we were able to close out

some games, get some wins. Things turned around."

Indeed, the Choctaws won 18 of their next 26 games and qualified for the conference tournament. They've continued to ride that wave this season.

"We didn't have all the pieces last year," Haworth said. "We've got more now. We're not there yet, but we're off to a good start. Give the guys credit. They never gave up last year. They kept fighting, and we started to win some games."

Returnees Hunter Sykes, Kyle Smith and Grant Barber have been consistent performers in a high-scoring

lineup, and newcomer Billy Cameron has had a major impact. The former East Central Community College star entered the Lee series batting .479 with four homers and 17 RBIs.

Another newcomer, Chris Crosby from Mississippi Gulf Coast CC, has stepped to the fore on the pitching staff. He won his first four starts with a 1.98 ERA. Veterans Hunter Mullis, Zack Ingram and Tommy Taborda, once and again the closer, also have been solid. MC had a 6.28 ERA in 2017. After 15 games this year, that number was 3.44.

Haworth is quick to acknowledge that the meat of the GSC schedule will be challenging.

"How the players handle it is up to us as coaches," he said. "We've got to push them every day. We're in for some battles, we know that." But he is confident that he and his staff have recruited the type of player they want.

"We told these guys coming in that we were trying to change the culture," Haworth said. "We wanted to find the right fit guys..."

"We want to be good in all three phases of the game. We want to work as one, pick each other up. The guys have done a good job of that. But baseball is a fickle game. We want to put Christ first no matter what. We want to be selfless and relentless in our mission. That's all we can ask for."

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