

Strong Jackets just need to stay healthy

BY TOMMY HICKS

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Experience will be the driving force behind the McGill-Toolen baseball team this season, and there's plenty of experience to go around. Now, if they can just stay healthy.

Head coach Tim Becker said he likes the makeup of this year's team and the level of experience on the roster, but injuries have already taken a toll in the preseason and that is a concern as the Yellow Jackets prepare for the upcoming year.

"We're excited about this season because we feel like we have a group of seniors that have a lot of experience over the last two or three years and some of that involving play-offs," Becker said. "This is a team — and every coach says this — but if we can just stay healthy we should be good. In reality,

we've had some injuries. One of our players (Justin Henderson) broke his collarbone in football and he's finally gotten back. Senior Sam Satterwhite in a basketball game the other day — he would have played third base for us — he tore his ACL and his meniscus so he's out. He had surgery the other day. I hate it for Sam. He was a leader on our team and we'll have to go from there.

"Michael Ellis, our centerfielder, twisted his ankle playing basketball the other day. It's not a break but he has to stay off it for two weeks. Michael definitely has a chance to play college baseball. He's 6-4 and plays centerfield and he's made himself into a really good hitter."

If McGill can avoid any other inju-



McGill-Toolen ace Chandler Best

Photos by Mike Kittrell/Call News

ries it carries a strong lineup into the season.

"We feel really confident about some of the things we've done," Becker said. "I think our pitching staff could be the strength of our team. Having coach (Thomas) Walker back working with our hitters again and doing the 1 on 5s, we're excited about what we have seen there."

On the mound, McGill returns Nathan LaRue, an Auburn commit, and Chandler Best, a Southern Miss commit. LaRue will catch primarily, though he played outfield in recent seasons. "It's not a very good combination, pitching and catching, but he'll be a pitcher for us too, and that's something Auburn will look at down the road with him being a pitcher. He has a tremendous arm. I truly think if he was a pitcher only he'd be a mid-90s guy," Becker said.

Best "has been our best pitcher the last three years, so we're excited about him," Becker said. "He's been upper 80s, low 90s, and he's a lefty. He's 25-1

for us since his sophomore year, so he's been really consistent and done very well for us."

Matthew Glover, committed to Spring Hill, is McGill's returning shortstop, and Spencer Hadley, also committed to Spring Hill, will be an asset at the plate and on the mound; he was 7-1 last year as a left-handed pitcher. Jennings Clayton will play second and Carson McClain will be in the outfield.

"In all reality, we just have to find a way to be as tough as we can," Becker said. "We're going to put as much pressure on our guys in practice as we can. Our schedule is brutal. We play against four teams that won state titles last year. This is the toughest schedule I've ever had. We also go to Moseley, Fla., and they're a good program. And we play Oxford, Miss., and Warren Central. We may not have the best record but we're going to play good teams. We want to see the best pitching we can see and put our team against good pitching. We're excited about this year."