

Pitching and defense shine for GCHS to start season despite lack of experience



Photo by Russell Turner / Herald Editor

GCHS junior Garrett Henderson is shown delivering a strike to an Oak Grove batter during the two school's opening day matchup. Henderson, who had zero varsity pitching experience coming into this season, has been solid in his first two outings of the year and earned the win on Saturday with a complete-game performance at Citronelle.

New faces on mound and in the field have shined for Wildcats thus far

By **RUSSELL TURNER**
Herald Staff

If there is one area of the GCHS baseball program that was hit particularly hard by the disruption caused by the pandemic it would be the pitching staff.

Coach Nick Chatham knew he had some work to do to replace the production from guys like Drake Henderson and Malachi Graham, who both graduated last year. Henderson was the ace for GCHS and Graham was a big contributor as well. But, with rising junior Conner West returning, Chatham felt he had a reliable arm he could build his pitching staff around for 2021. West came on strong as a freshman and had the most innings pitched and most appearances of any GCHS pitcher when the season was cancelled last year. And, collegiate coaches were taking notice, making him a top prospect for the Class of 2022. Shoulder surgery shut down his junior season, and while he should be back and ready for his senior campaign, his loss was a big blow to Chatham's plans.

"With Conner's injury we entered the season without any of our three top arms from a year ago," Chatham said. "Losing Conner was a big hit to us. He has been a guy we could give the ball to

and know he will give us a chance to get a win."

"Without him we are returning very few guys with any varsity experience at all. We've got some players we feel can be solid for us, but missing those innings last year absolutely killed our pitching depth. The guys we turn to this season are going to have to grow up quick on the mound."

Chatham says he has a handful of players he can turn to in the pitching rotation. So far, the results have been pleasantly surprising.

Junior lefty Garrett 'Bunky' Henderson was the first to get thrown into the fire as he earned the start on opening day against Oak Grove. He performed very well against one of the top programs in the state, scattering eight hits over four innings and giving up just two earned runs along the way. He struck out five Warriors in the game, but

most importantly, didn't give up a single free base on balls.

"Bunky saw action in JV last year, but we need to get a lot of varsity innings out of him this year," Chatham said. "I thought he did a great job against Oak Grove. Hopefully he can build on that moving forward."

Henderson did just that on Saturday as he led his team to a 6-2 win at Citronelle with a complete-game performance in which he struck out four, scattered five hits and did not allow an earned run.

Senior Jackson Dueitt was the starter in game two on opening day and it is hard to imagine anyone having a more efficient outing. Dueitt pitched a complete game against West Marion and threw just 68 pitches over seven complete innings. He didn't earn the win, but his ability to throw strikes and let his defense work behind him was just what Chatham

wanted to see. His second start was even more impressive as he led the Cats to an 8-0 win over George County at home last Friday. Dueitt was dialed in against the Rebels throwing 75 percent of his 81 total pitches for strikes and not allowing a single base on balls. With solid defense behind him once again he allowed just three hits and four total base runners.

"Jackson has had two great outings for us already," Chatham said. "He has been a strike machine. He throws a

ton of curve balls for strikes and has struck out six in two games. But, the main thing he did was pitched to contact and gave our defense a chance to make plays behind him."

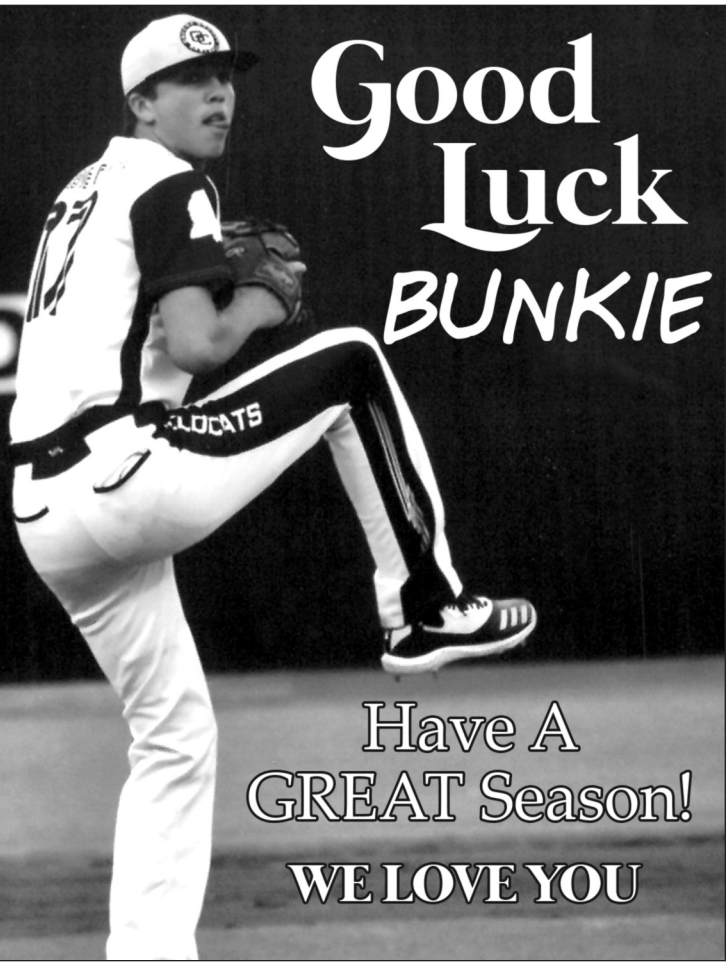
"Jackson has really come a long way on the mound and we are going to depend on him a lot this year. He works so hard and you can count on getting the most he has to give every day."

Gannon Henderson is a junior right-hander with an 85-86 MPH fastball and a good curve. He saw JV action

last year, but has the 'stuff' to be an impact player on the mound for GCHS, particularly if he can improve his command and consistency.

Junior Brayden Brewer saw action in two varsity games last season and posted a 1-0 record. He tossed five innings on the year and gave up just one earned run, while striking out six. If he can post those types of numbers over a full season and multiple

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