

Depth and experience should make pitching and defense strengths for Cats



Photo by Russell Turner / Herald Editor

Senior lefty Garrett ‘Bunkie’ Henderson is shown delivering a big curve ball for a strike against George County earlier this season. Henderson emerged as an integral part of the Wildcats’ pitching rotation last season and is expected to play a huge role again this year. Pitching talent and depth is expected to be a plus for GCHS this season thanks to the continued development of players like Henderson.

Throwing strikes and reducing errors will be the key for GCHS this season

By **BRAD CROWE & RUSSELL TURNER**
Herald Staff

Though there are always a multitude of different ways to win a baseball game, the only sure-fire way to prevent losing one is to keep the opposing team off the scoreboard. With experienced playmakers scattered all throughout this season’s defensive lineup, the Wildcats enter 2022 more confident than ever in their ability to do just that.

As always, those efforts must begin on the mound, where the task at hand was once summed into a few simple words by locally-born pitching legend Satchel Paige — “Throw strikes. The mound don’t move.”

Though the ability to do that appeared to be one of the Wildcats’ biggest question marks just a year ago, a talented and seasoned pitching staff looks to be one of the team’s strengths for the 2022 campaign.

“Through the first several games I feel really good about our pitching staff,” Chatham said. “Collin (Pipkins) has given us some great innings as a starter and so have Conner (West) and Bunkie Henderson” (Garrett Henderson)

“Brayden Brewer has been lights out in relief. I feel like our pitching staff is going to keep us in every ballgame this year.”

West, Henderson and Pipkins will lead the way for the Wildcats this season for GCHS. West is the most experienced of the group, but due to missing last season with an injury, the Jones College signee feels he has a little something to prove in 2022. Pipkins had some big

moments a year ago and is expected to be one of the starters in the region series. And, Henderson has come on extremely strong and provides a lot of depth to the starting rotation. All three have thrown well thus far.

Having coached the group each step of the way since they first suited up to play for GCHS, Chatham believes their level of familiarity with his system will make them an invaluable piece of the puzzle for the team’s overall success.

“Those senior guys have been with the program for six years now, and I really believe senior players are almost like an extension of the head coach,” Chatham said. “So they’ll definitely play a huge role in any success we’re able to enjoy this season.”

Despite missing most of his sophomore campaign and his entire junior season, West is the team’s most experienced arm. He had a huge season as a freshman with a 3.86 ERA and 39 strikeouts in 54 innings pitched. He was off to a hot start as a sophomore with 22 punch-outs in 21 innings pitched before COVID shut down play. So far this year, West is 1-0 in two starts with a zero ERA over 11.2 innings of work.

“I was a little worried at first that I wasn’t going to get back to the original strength that I had before surgery,” West admitted. “But now after the surgery and being fully recovered, I’m stronger than I was before. Being able to still get this opportunity to play is rewarding.”

For his part, Chatham said he’s proud West is getting that opportunity too.

“Conner is just a really great young man,” Chatham said. “It starts at home, and his parents have done a great job of raising him and giving him the opportunities to succeed.”

“It’s been nearly two years since Conner’s been able to play because of the arm injury, but we’re excited to

have him back on the team along with the other seniors. He’ll be a great representative of both our community and the program at Jones in the years ahead.”

Henderson, who stepped into a major role for the Wildcats last spring is the second most experienced pitcher for GCHS. The lefty logged 37 strikeouts and posted a 2.98 ERA through his first year in the varsity rotation, ending the season with two wins and no losses on his resume. So far this year, he as a team-high 14 innings in three starts. He pitched well in the opener against Vancleave and against George County on Saturday, and has recorded 14 strikeouts compared to just three walks.

Pipkins wasted no time before making a major impact for the Wildcats during his first varsity campaign as a sophomore. His first-ever start on the mound last February was a no-hitter against _____.

From there, Pipkins’ momentum grew and he finished with just 17 earned runs against him and a team-high 44 strikeouts in 42 innings of work on the mound. He even registered a playoff win in May with a five-inning performance against North Pike.

Chatham believes Pipkins — who also serves as the team’s second-year starter at second base when he isn’t pitching — is only beginning to scratch the surface of his potential and will be a tremendous asset to the team any time he steps onto the field.

Of course, Pipkins’ no-hitter nor any other Wildcat wins would have been possible without a great performance from All-District catcher Jace Lott, who serves as the senior quarterback for the Wildcats’ defense.

“We have a solid group of strike throwers,” said long-time GCHS pitching coach Dale Kimble. “Conner West, Collin Pipkins, Bunkie Henderson and Brayden Brewer are all

potential starters for us and Phillip Herring, John Bufkin, and Ethan Roberts will all be expected to pitch in certain situations.”

“We must throw all our pitches for strikes to keep opponents off balance. We are not going to overpower people, therefore we must play good defense behind them. Without a solid catcher our pitching staff would not be complete and we have a solid catcher in Jace Lott.”

With Lott behind the plate and the duo of senior Brayden Brewer and Pipkins at shortstop and second base, Chatham’s team boast a ton of experience and talent up the middle. Brewer is a third-year letterman at shortstop and a proven playmaker, while Pipkins is an athletic and intelligent player at second.

“Brayden is a natural athlete with great instincts,” Chatham said of the senior right-hander. “He’s a competitor and a steadying force in the middle infield for us. He and Collin have great chemistry together.”

“Jace has become a really solid defensive catcher for us. He has a high baseball IQ and does a great job of blocking balls in the dirt and keep-

ing base runners in check with a strong arm and a knack for getting big outs with back-picks of baserunners at first and second.”

Brewer also has a lot of experience on the mound and will

be a big part of the rotation, primarily as a reliever.

While the middle of the

See **DEFENSE**
Page 6-B

PREMIUM Service & Products

Shop & Save
Pick 5
Pick any 5 frozen items for
\$19.99

Vegetables, Meat, Rolls, Biscuits, Chicken, Sausage

Go Get'em WILDCATS

Great Prices on
SHOWTIME Dog Food, Livestock Feed, Wildlife Feed & Supplements


Ice • Snacks • Fuel

ICE \$1.79 (8 lb bag) \$2.79 (20 lb bag)

\$2.59

28 oz. Powerade Products

MAIN STREET QUICK STOP
706 MAIN STREET
LEAKESVILLE, MS
(601)394-5988



Make A GREAT Catch

with our delicious

All - You - Can - Eat CATFISH DINNER

ROCKY CREEK CATFISH & COLLECTIBLES
Hwy 63 North • Lucedale
(601)947-6888

BUSINESS HOURS:
Thursday, Friday & Saturday
11 a.m. - 9:30 p.m.

Have A Great Season Wildcats!



Jace

Time has flown by *ALMOST* as fast as your throws
DOWN TO SECOND BASE.

We Love You!



Mama, BooBoo & Jordan