

2009 Season Preview



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For four years the nucleus of the North Carolina A&T baseball team has been pretty much the same.

If an Aggies baseball fan went to War Memorial Stadium on a given day over the last four seasons, there was an above average chance Nick Mayo was going to be at shortstop. They could almost count on Jeremy Jones coming up with a timely hit or Charlie Gamble hitting monster home runs over the right-center field wall.

Coming out of the dugout with his catcher's equipment on after every bottom half of the inning at War Memorial was almost always Neil Rosser.

Then there was Joe McIntyre, who established himself as a clutch hitter who connected on numerous walk-off hits to lead N.C.

A&T to victories. Fans could also count on John Primus to pitch quite a few innings throughout the season.

Those names helped the Aggies baseball team win a MEAC Championship, they assisted the Aggies in playing in two MEAC title games and they were a part of the Aggies winning 106 games from 2005-2008. It was certainly one of the best eras in the history of Aggies baseball and it was the best stretch of success head coach Keith Shumate has experienced during his 13-year tenure at N.C. A&T.

This season, the lineup card looks much different than it has in previous years. The Aggies only have two everyday starters returning from the 2007 team that won a team-record 29 games and went 11-6 in the MEAC to finish second.



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There are 11 new Aggies on the roster. Even Shumate's junior and seniors have not played major roles over the last few seasons. Despite the newness, the Aggies schedule is still a challenging one with teams like N.C. State, Charlotte, Georgia Southern, UNC Greensboro among others still occupying it.

Then there are the MEAC games, where perennial power Bethune-Cookman leads a contingency of strong teams throughout the conference. But Shumate says wait a minute before considering this season a down one for the Aggies.

"We have a lot of respect for all our conference opponents," said Shumate. "But a tournament in mid May isn't won in January on paper. We have to prepare and improve every day...scratch and claw."

We have a lot of work to do. If the young players adjust fast enough and the pitchers settle into their roles, we could be a force in May. Never count us out."

Shumate's optimism shows how much he believes in his freshman class after losing a considerable amount of talent from last season's team.

Jones hit .404 with 13 home runs, 63 RBIs and 91 hits, which led the MEAC. Another big bat the Aggies lost came from McIntyre, who led the MEAC in doubles last season while hitting .332 with seven home runs and 58 RBIs. In fact, the Aggies recorded 565 hits last season. The players who combined for 337 of those hits or nearly 60 percent of that production are no longer on the team.

Shumate is confident, however, in the two players he is building around. Junior outfielder C.J. Beatty is one of the best players in the MEAC. He has compiled numerous awards in his first two seasons as an Aggie, including two first-team All-MEAC selections, a MEAC Rookie of the Year honor, a N.C. A&T athletics department Male Rookie of the Year honor and last season he was named the athletics department's Male Athlete of the Year. In addition, he has major league baseball scouts interested in his development as a player.

Beatty's career numbers back up his accolades. He is a career .327 hitter with 23 home runs and 93 RBIs. Beatty has also led the MEAC in home runs every season he has been in an Aggies uniform.

"Beatty is a proven force. Period," said Shumate. "He can provide bases in bunches. He has power that never sleeps. Being able to switch hit keeps him from being pitched to in late innings. He makes pitchers pay for their mistakes better than any hitter I have had since being at A&T."

The Aggies other returning top hitter is Nick Rogers. After primarily being a pitcher as a freshman, Rogers emerged as a powerful bat in the Aggies lineup last season. He batted .319 with 10 home runs and 58 RBIs. But in 2009, Rogers looks to be headed back to the mound to become a key member of Shumate's rotation.

Therefore, he will leave his 2008 duties as the Aggies first baseman to become Jones' replacement at designated hitter.

"Nick has really matured in the pitching department and is in his best shape ever," said Shumate. "His presence in the lineup is crucial. He is a proven RBI guy and provides great protection for C.J. Beatty in our lineup. Power is critical in the designated hitter spot and Nick certainly fits the bill."

Although Beatty and Rogers remain in the middle of the Aggies lineup, the Aggies pitching staff is brand new even with Rogers, who only pitched 40 innings last season. Joining Rogers in the rotation will be left-handed senior Ryan Sellers. Sellers has mainly been a relief pitcher during his career. Although injuries have

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taken away from some of his playing time, he is an experienced pitcher. Another left-hander, Jared Via, could also make the starting rotation along with D.J. Dawson and Chris Watson.

Shumate said they all showed significant improvement during the fall. Newcomers Nick Oelker, Nick Boles, Blaine McCraw, Garret Braun, Ruben Torrellas, and Esterlin Paulino will also play a role for the Aggies in the pitching department whether it is as relievers or starters. Shumate will not establish his starting rotation for the conference until he is able to see who emerges as the most consistent pitchers.

"We have strike throwers in camp this year," said Shumate. "I am pleased with the work ethic and feel this group collectively will succeed and do extremely well as the defensive unit improves and gets some games under its belt."

The position that will be responsible for handling the Aggie pitchers – catcher – will be headed up by Lester Rivenbark. Rivenbark has played sparingly behind Rosser over the last two seasons. He has played in 67 games with 46 starts.

"Lester is a leader," said Shumate. "Having him in the lineup will be a plus. He is someone with whom all the pitchers work well, and he is a fine example to the other catches."

Newcomers Eric Chiz and Joey Moye will back up Rivenbark with assistance from junior college transfer Ty Hall and senior Jaron Neal.

The rest of the Aggies infield is also revamped. The Aggies third base position will likely be turned over to Cyril Daniel. Daniel, who has mostly been a reliever during his time at N.C. A&T, improved his strength in the weight room during the off-season. Mullins, another former reliever

for the Aggies, should take over the first base duties. Mullins impressed the Aggie coaches over the fall with the power he showed.

"They both are in better shape and stronger," said Shumate. "We have the need for some pop on the corners. These men can fill the bill once they get 50 to 75 at bats under their belts."

The Aggies middle infield has seen a revolving door at the second base position. As unstable as second base was for N.C. A&T, the shortstop position solely belonged to Mayo. The Winston-Salem native manned the position for four seasons. Now both positions are wide open. A year ago, the academically-gifted James Howard held down second base.

This season, Shumate plans to use Howard as a multi-purpose player. That leaves the two positions open for three freshmen. Xavier Macklin, Marquis Riley and Frankie Johnson all have a chance to step into the starting lineup this season.

"Marquis Riley is a ballplayer," said Shumate. "He catches the ball, turns the double play and slugs. Frankie is capable of playing all three of the throwing infield positions and could catch in an emergency. He is one of the best athletes on the club who only needs experience to blossom. Macklin would be the best athlete on any team. He is capable of handling any position on the field and will provide speed and power for the Aggies."

The Aggies outfield has a little more experience. Beatty has played left and center field during his career. He will go to right field this season. Freshman Carvell Copeland is Shumate's favorite to play center field. Shumate envisions him being his future leadoff hitter. With Copeland and Beatty solidified, it leaves one position for two men.

UNC-Pembroke transfers B.J. Curtis and George Hines are those men. Both made starts last season with Hines making 23 starts and Curtis making 13. Howard could also see time in the outfield.

"I'm excited about our overall outfield potential," said Shumate. "We have speed, range and defense. We have power in Curtis who is starting to learn himself as a hitter. I feel that Hines is a huge key. He has improved immensely as a hitter this fall and has the rare combination of power and speed."

The new-look Aggies open conference play at Norfolk State on March 21. By then, Shumate hopes his young team has grown accustomed to Division I play. He also hopes they are on their way to making names for themselves the way Jones, Gamble and McIntyre did during their recent tenure at N.C. A&T.

"The players are the ones who win games," said Shumate. "Players deserve 100 percent of the credit, and they will never get any of the blame on tough days in this program." ■