

BASEBALL

UAlbany's Field of Dreams

By BOB WEINER

The University at Albany's baseball team surprised everyone but the gritty Great Danes themselves when they obliterated the school record for victories last spring. Ranked just 205th out of nearly 300 Division I teams in the country before the season began, UAlbany not only earned a berth in the America East Conference tournament for the first time in program history, but also came within a few victories of capturing their first NCAA tournament bid.

Fifth-year head coach Jon Mueller, a former minor league standout with both the Albany-Colonie Diamond Dogs and the Adirondack Lumberjacks, put an emphasis on team chemistry and selfless play. The Great Danes responded with a glittering 37-14 record that shattered the previous team record for victories in a season. Albany was 21-21 in 1999.

"We thought that we had a strong nucleus coming back," said Mueller, who was named the America East Conference Coach of the Year. "We had some experienced kids on the mound, a lot of good leadership, and great team chemistry. That was the key to our season. We played together as a team. Nobody cared who got the credit."

Although the Great Danes failed to win the America East Conference tournament and an automatic bid into the NCAA playoffs, they put the program on the national baseball map. Senior Dan Schoonmaker, the America East Conference Player of the Year, led a group of six teammates on the conference

all-star team. Adam Kroft, a senior right-handed pitcher, became only the fourth player in program history to be drafted. The San Diego Padres picked Kroft in the 30th round, as the 882nd pick overall, in the annual Major League Draft.

"I think we brought a lot of national attention to the University," said Mueller. "Our goal was to win the America East Conference tournament and qualify for the NCAAs. I think we were good enough to do that this year, but we lost a third of our position players going into the tournament through an assortment of injuries and academic problems. We went into the tournament limping," said Mueller.

"We thought we had a good enough team to go to the tournament this year," said Schoonmaker, who batted .353 with 10 home runs and a school-record 51 runs batted in (RBI). He ended his UAlbany career second in home runs (23) and third in RBI (125).

"It was just a lot of fun all year," he said. "It was a shame we lost some of our best players just before the tournament. It was also tough that we lost so many games to rainouts this year. We could have had maybe 10 more victories if we hadn't had so many games rained out."

Senior Adam Kroft was UAlbany's all-time leader in strikeouts, appearances and innings pitched.

"The coaches, student-athletes and staff set the tone for success during the non-traditional season," said Lee McElroy, director of Athletics and Recreation. "I could see the intensity, commitment, dedication and discipline exhibited by everyone. I knew a special season would follow. Coach Mueller and the team can win consistently while building a team that performs at the national level and balances academics and athletics. We are very excited about the future of UAlbany baseball."

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— Head Baseball Coach Jon Mueller

Kroft, who joined Mike Grasso (2002, 11th round, Atlanta Braves), Steve Checksfield (2001, 26th round, Houston Astros) and Terry Kenny (1974, ninth round, San Francisco Giants) as the only Great Danes drafted by the Major Leagues, was a prime example of Albany's talent pool. He leaves the program as the Great Danes' all-time leader in strike-outs (197), appearances (45) and innings pitched (247.2).

"I am feeling both excitement and relief," said Kroft about being drafted. "I've dreamed about something like this since Little League. Coming to UAlbany and playing college baseball has helped me learn how to play the game and how to compete."

UAlbany excelled in every department. Senior right-hander Steve Emmerthal led the conference in victories, posting an 8-3 record with a 4.48 earned run average. Junior shortstop Joe Lamb led the conference in runs (48), hit .321 and was second in stolen bases (22), while designated hitter Derek DeGrazio was fourth among the league's hitting leaders with a .369 batting average, to go along with 45 RBI and six home runs.

Senior second baseman Kirt Zimmewicz topped the Great Danes in hitting with a .391 average and added 10 home runs and 42 RBI. Outfielder Brendan Chiavaro contributed a .299 batting average, 42 RBI and 35 runs scored.

"We will lose a lot of guys from this team, and each year is different than the year before," said Mueller. "But I like the class we have coming in. We got a taste of being in the conference tournament, and that is all the motivation that next year's team will need to succeed."

Bob Weiner, B.A.'83, is a sports writer for the Daily Gazette in Schenectady, N.Y.



Photos: Bob Ewell