

Baylor Baseball Fall Notebook: Belief in the Bears

Confidence high as Bears wrap up fall slate

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WACO, Texas – Assistant coach Zach Dillon is no stranger to seeing success on the banks of the Brazos.

The starting DH on BU's 2005 College World Series team and an assistant coach for the Bears' magical 2012 "Feed The Beaver" squad that won 49 games and hosted a Super Regional, Dillon knows what it takes to win at this level.

"I think the big word around here for me is 'belief'," Dillon said. "Getting everybody in the operation pulling on the same end of the rope and believing in each other and getting everybody going in the same direction is how you start to build a winning program again. And that's where we're at – we're in the belief stage. We've got the pieces, and I feel like we can be really competitive and put a quality product on the field in the spring. Now, it's about our guys believing it, owning it and going out and achieving it."

Dillon, who played at Baylor from 2003-2006, was an integral part of three NCAA Tournament squads, two NCAA Super Regional appearances and that 2005 team that made the program's most recent trip to Omaha. He was a two-time All-Big 12 selection and a semifinalist for the 2006 Johnny Bench Award, which recognizes the nation's top catcher.

"I think that's why I'm here, I think that's why [former Bear] Coach [Jim] Blair is here, this was more of a passion project for us," said Dillon. "We saw a once-proud top-25 program, and we wanted to help Coach [Mitch] Thompson bring it back to what it was. And we feel like we're on our way. It's taken some time, obviously, and we've gone through some adversity, but there's not a lot of quit in our coaching staff, so we're going to keep pushing every day to get it back to where it was."

Despite seasons with 20 and 22 wins in the first two years under Thompson, year three shows promise with a group of veteran position players at the core. Among them are senior outfielders Enzo Apodaca, Ty Johnson and Wesley Jordan, who accounted for nearly 36% of the team's offense a year ago.

"Anytime you can return guys, especially in the current state of college athletics, it's a big deal," said Dillon. "When you know their personalities and what makes them go, that's big-time. Those guys are hungry to win and are holding each other to a high standard. Having them in the clubhouse is like an extension of the coaching staff. Our day-to-day standard has been raised, and they understand the value of that."

In 2024, the outfield trio combined to start 17 games together while occupying the top three spots in the batting order, producing a combined 33 doubles, seven triples, 17 home runs and 94 RBIs on the year.

“We put a lot of trust in each other,” Apodaca said. “We have a good relationship off the field – we’re actually all roommates – so we get a lot of collaboration and talk off the field about the outfield. They’re my guys out there, and I know that they’re going to do their job.”

With the Apodaca-Johnson-Jordan trio setting the tone, other returners including senior infielder Hunter Teplanszky, senior catcher Cortlan Castle and fifth-year Hunter Simmons help provide a wealth of experience and leadership.

“We’re very experienced, and we’re a lot older. Even the guys we brought in from the transfer portal are experienced,” Apodaca said. “I’m expecting a lot of that senior leadership to step up this spring. That will help us get over any obstacles – having guys to lean on and pick you up when you’re down.”

Alongside that experienced group of position players, a new wave of arms on the mound have turned heads throughout the fall, including sophomore southpaw Mason Green, who racked up 18 strikeouts and allowed just one walk throughout the fall.

“We’ve had a great fall [on the mound] as a staff, so we feel like we can go up against anyone out there,” said Green. “It just makes us hungry for the spring. We want to get out there and start facing other competition, because we know what we’ve been able to do against [our own] hitters.”

After being thrown into the fire as a true freshman in 2024, making his collegiate debut against then-No. 5 and eventual national champion Tennessee as a reliever entering with the bases loaded and no outs, Green worked out of danger to record three consecutive outs. Despite some first-year struggles, Green flashed as a freshman with impressive starts against Houston (5.1IP, 3H, 3SO) and Texas Tech (6.0 IP, 2H, 0ER, 3SO). This fall, he’s already made big strides towards achieving his goals.

“Not taking things too seriously, that’s really it. When you put too much pressure on yourself, it’s hard to come out of those situations well,” said Green. “When you let go of that chip on your shoulder, it’s a lot easier to go in there and just focus on you and the catcher.”

With seven strong weeks of intrasquad scrimmages under their belt, the biggest takeaway for this group of Bears has been confidence.

“I’m pretty sure everyone says baseball is 90% mental and 10% talent,” said Green. “It’s really all about confidence, because if you don’t have confidence in yourself, it’s hard to play to your full potential. I feel like we’re really starting to figure out who belongs in certain positions and who can handle the pressure for big moments in the spring.”

Baylor will open its 2025 season on Feb. 14 against Youngstown State as part of an eight-game homestand to begin the season. Fans will have many chances to see the Bears in Waco, as 33 of BU's 54 regular-season contests are set to be played at Baylor Ballpark.

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