**Baseball Wins First Ever GCAC-Sponsored Regular Season Championship Outright**

**HUNTSVILLE, Ala. –**The Rust College baseball program could have been forgiven for possibly overlooking a winless opponent with a regular season conference championship at stake, but the Cats came ready to handle business, dropping 12 runs in the first inning of game one to win 19-0 then following it up with seven runs over the opening two frames of game two to etch its name into NAIA, GCAC, and Rust College lore.

No matter what happens from this point moving forward into the Conference Tournament in Jackson next week, every member of this 2023 squad can never have the fact that they were the inaugural GCAC Baseball Regular Season Champions stripped from their grasp.

The men from Holly Springs, Mississippi now roll into Smith-Wills Stadium as the top seed and favorite to capture the program’s first ever NAIA Tournament berth while also keeping an eye on the selection show for the Black College World Series as it attempts to make that tournament for the third consecutive season.

The Blue and White have claimed seven straight Gulf Coast Athletic Conference victories that were decided on the diamond (excluding a forfeit loss due to lack of umpires), and four-in-a-row overall by a combined run differential of +53.

Head Coach John Bates and company took down a pair of NCAA Division II opponents, winning 3-of-4 in a split at Tuskegee and a sweep of LeMoyne-Owen en route to a 14-4 conference record plus its second straight season with a .500 or better overall mark at 21-21.

Prior to 2022’s 17-15-1 (.530) showing, the Baseball Bearcats had not posted a winning campaign since 2004, the once downtrodden program ended a 17-season string of misery and with Coach Bates fronting the show, look to be a fixture at the top of standings for years to come.

An offensive juggernaut, the boom sticks started the season off slow but turned the corner, eventually totaling the second-most stolen bases (200), eighth-most triples (18), 17th-highest on-base percentage (.442) and the 22nd-most walks (226) in the NAIA while averaging 9.1 runs a ballgame.

As a whole, the pitching staff has been hit or miss but the one constant has been keeping the opposition in the ballpark, yielding only 21 home runs for the year, the 19th-fewest in the country.

Bearcat catchers have been one of the toughest backstops to steal on, nabbing 25 would-be stolen bases at a 24% clip, ranking second-best in the nation in the former and top-55 for the latter.

Individually, numerous Blue and White clad players have made their way onto the national leaderboards including Jalin Thomas, Stone Teague, Jesse Burton III, Malik Berrien, and Khalil Robinson.

Thomas shows up in four different categories including one defensively as he is 14th in the country with five triples, top-35 for walks at 33, top-45 regarding his 27 extra-base hits, and has thrown out the 11th-most baserunners of 15. The Columbus, Georgia native leads the squad in batting average (.379), on-base percentage (.515), hits (47), RBIs (40), walks (33), and fielding percentage (.986).

Khalil Robinson has been the big bopper in the heart of the lineup, sitting just outside the top-25 in slugging percentage at .786 while fronting the Cats with 11 homers.

Stone Teague is right behind Thomas in the triples department, among the nation’s top-35 with four while both Jesse Burton III as well as Malik Berrien are slotted inside the NAIA’s top-20 for steals, swiping 31 and 29, respectively.

Berrien has caused nightmares for the opposition’s coaching staff and battery mates, using his speed to score a club-high 42 times and leg out a Bearcat-best 15 doubles.

The starting rotation primarily consists of Jackson Bryant, Joseph Thomas, Cohen Keats, Brytan Sampson and either Matthew Davis or Devin Tallington.

The go-to guy out of the bullpen is undoubtedly Xavier Campbell who leads the team in wins (4-0) and ERA (4.58) with the lone save while the strikeouts have usually come from either Sampson (37, 9.51 K/9) or William Baker (9.55 K/9).

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