

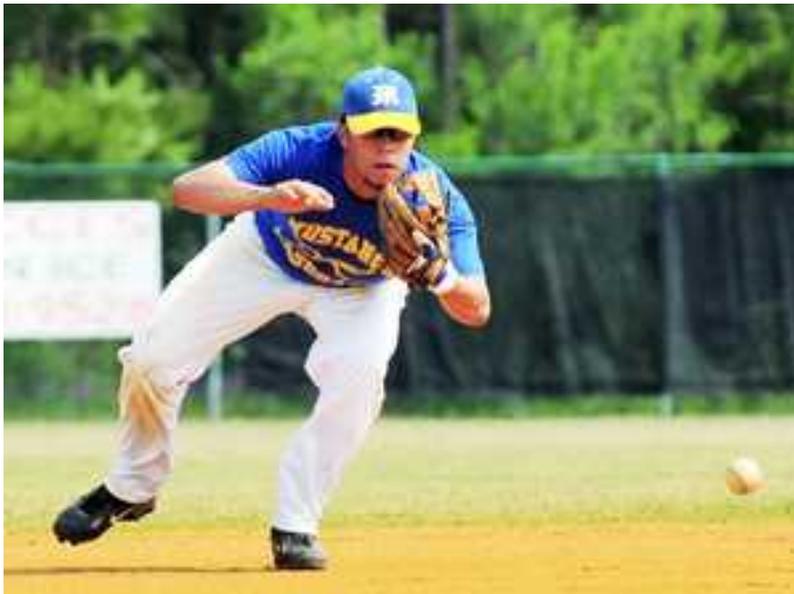
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Macon State takes aim at club championship

By JOHN KOSATER - sports@macon.com

When J.P. Mitchell decided to put together a club baseball team at Macon State, he could not have even imagined it would go this well.

He was just looking to play the game he loved. But after winning the district and regional tournaments, the Mustangs are headed to the NCBA World Series in Johnstown, Pa., to try and bring back a national title. Macon State is one of eight teams that made it to the Division II championship series and will open up play against Southern Illinois-Carbondale on Friday.



BEAU CABELL/THE TELEGRAPH
Macon State shortstop Devon Crouse fields a grounder during practice.

left-hander. They usually get the starts for us. Joey Jones is basically a mixture of both of them. We will stick to what we have done lately, and that means Brandon gets the ball for the first game.”

Byran is a former Crawford County standout.

“It’s probably the biggest start of my life,” he said. “I went to Lagrange College out of high school to play baseball and football, but it just wasn’t a good fit for me. I pretty much figured that that was it as far as sports, but when they got this club baseball thing going, I knew I had to try it. We have a great bunch of guys on this team, and it has really worked out well. Our guys play great defense behind me. Being in a national tournament is why we all play the game. I never thought it would get to this, but it’s just a great feeling to be where we are.”

Byram, who feels comfortable throwing all four of his pitches, has a simple plan when he is on the mound.

“Strikes. I will always be around the plate, and I throw a lot of strikes,” he said. “I am not the kind of pitcher who will strike out 20, but I try not and hurt the team by walking hitters. My defense will be key.”

If Macon State wins its first game, it could set up a unique matchup, with the Mustangs playing Penn State.

“If they win and we win, that’s what will happen,” Mitchell said. “It’s pretty crazy to think that a team from Macon could be playing Penn State. We are just going to do what we have been doing, and hopefully we will come back with the championship.”

“I just missed playing baseball and I knew that Georgia Southern and Georgia played club baseball, so I made a few phone calls and found out who I needed to talk to,” said Mitchell, who also serves as the team’s coach. “Overall this year we have had over 40 different guys on the roster, but right now we have 12, which is a good number for us. We had 13, but one of our guys, Michael Avery from Tattnell Square, got drafted by an independent league team so he had to report right away. His loss will hurt us, but we feel like we are a well-balanced team and we have just enough depth that it won’t be too difficult on us.”

Among the standouts on the team are Northside product Kurt Thornburg, who was invited to the DeMarini NCBA home run derby, Mitchell from Trinity Christian, who leads the team in hitting with a .509 average while playing second base, Shortstop Devon Crouse from Westside and a strong pitching staff led by Joey Wood, Joey Jones and Brandon Byram.

“We feel like we have a very strong pitching staff, and Brandon will pitch the first game,” Mitchell said. “We have confidence in all of them. Joey Wood can gas it up pretty good, and Brandon is just your typical crafty