

# In A Class All Their Own

As the Notre Dame baseball program pays tribute to its eight-member senior class today, it's only fitting that they provide their own thoughts on the past four years. Here's a sampling:

**RHP Matt Buchmeier:** "Our class is a very unselfish group. I'd just love to keep winning as a team, even if I'm not throwing. For us, it's always team over individuals."

**DH Matt Bok:** "The personality of this team is what sets it apart. They really are winners, even the guys who don't play a lot. They contribute in other ways, by their attitude and how they carry themselves. I'm proud to be part of that and hope the younger guys learn the right way."

**OF Matt Strickroth:** "This is a group of guys who come to win everyday and who learned how to win by our junior year. We truly believe in one another."

**C Paul O'Toole:** "We helped take this program to the next level and the team dynamic is unbelievable. Everybody sticks up for one another and team's have to be really on their game if they want to beat us."

**DH Ken Meyer:** "Our class is a full-tilt competitive group. I truly admire Steve Stanley (see feature later in program), Andrew Bushey and Paul O'Toole, for what they have done as leaders since the first day."

The past four seasons have seen Notre Dame win 73.4 percent of its games (177-63-1), ranking as the fourth-best four-year record in the last 87 seasons of Notre Dame baseball (behind the classes of '93, '92 and '94).

Here's a look at the raw statistical numbers amassed by the 2002 senior class during their college careers:

- 1,227 games played, with 972 starts
- a .318 combined batting avg. (1,119-for-3,523)
- 571 RBI and 744 runs scored
- 64 home runs, 40 triples and 211 doubles
- more walks (428) than strikeouts (372)
- 188 stolen bases and 60 sacrifice bunts
- the two pitchers have combined for a 17-7 record, 10 saves, 253 innings, 201 strikeouts and just 95 walks

The value of the senior class is not lost on the younger players.

"Those guys are the greatest leaders I've ever played with," says junior rightfielder Kris Billmaier. "They've truly shown us how to be seniors next year and those will be some tough shoes to fill."

"I want a great season so bad for myself, but mostly for the seniors. On and off field, they do the right thing all the time."

"Go to war with them any day – and that's the best compliment that you can give a teammate."

Here's a closer look at the senior class (Stanley on pp. 10-11):

## THE UNEXPECTED

Bok had been recruited by Notre Dame but attended Georgetown, with the Hoyas facing the Irish late in that 1999 season. When Bok decided he wanted to transfer, he actually was in attendance at Notre Dame's 1999 NCAA Regional – getting an up-close look at his future teammates.

Despite a rocky first season at Notre Dame, Bok steadily has emerged as a regular contributor while

filling roles at catcher, in the outfield and (most notably) as a switch-hitting DH. In fact, he collected RBI from both sides of the plate in a wild 2000 NCAA Tournament elimination-game victory over Tulane (10-9) and went on to earn third team all-BIG EAST honors in 2001.

His clutch hits have been more common in the 2002 campaign, highlighted by the 11th-inning triple and run scored to beat Virginia Tech in that series opener (2-1). Bok also has provided needed versatility to the lineup, hitting with equal efficiency in the No. 2 or No. 7 spots.

"I've made some adjustments in my swing throughout the season and have become faster and stronger," he says. "That's all helped me to have a more consistent season."

Like many of his teammates, Bok's most vivid memories with the Irish are team events – such as NCAA Regional wins, the exhibition game vs. the Tampa Bay Devil Rays and winning the Fresno State Classic – rather than individual accomplishments. And that's just a sign that he truly has become one of the group.

"I've never once felt out of place around these guys. It's such a close team and close class," he says. "It's to the point where I've totally identified with being part of this class."

"I took a big risk leaving Georgetown, because I had a lot of friends there and I liked the school a lot. But I never have regretted my decision. These have been a great three years for me."

## THE HOOSIER

Buchmeier is the lone remaining Indiana native on a 2002 Irish baseball team that includes players from 21 different states, stretching from Washington to Hawaii, to Florida and New York.

After enduring an often-rocky freshman season, Buchmeier emerged as one of the staff's most improved pitchers in 2000 and again in 2001. When ace pitcher Aaron Heilman was roughed up by Tulane in the first NCAA matchup between the teams, it was Buchmeier who held the fort with three shutout innings as the Irish rallied for an 8-4 win. He also logged six strong innings as the starter in a pivotal game at the 2001 Fresno State Classic vs. Miami of Ohio, with the Irish going on to win 3-2 in the 10th.

Nagging tendonitis has hindered Buchmeier's progress during the past two seasons – "a lot of guys have faced similar things, everyone has gone through it," he shrugs – but the Indiana native still has proven to be a tough strikeout pitcher this season (18 Ks in 12 IP, with just 5 walks) while registering a 3.09 ERA and three key saves.

Off the field, Buchmeier has undergone a noteworthy transition during the past four years.

"I can remember 'Buch' being this shy guy in the corner during our freshman year and his pitching often mirrored that," says Stanley.

"But I don't think you'll find a guy in our class who has grown as much personally. Now he's the life of the party and is always trying to get people organized. He's become sort of our social coordinator and it's great to see."

## THE GAMER

Third baseman **Andrew Bushey's** career essentially has included two parts, with his first two seasons limited by knee and shoulder problems. But the player who personifies Mainieri's rough-and-tumble style has emerged as one of the top

Irish players during the past two seasons, earning first team all-BIG EAST honors in 2001 while tying the team RBI record earlier this week (7) vs. Detroit.

"Early in my career, I never got to settle down and I just needed that confidence from playing everyday," explains Bushey.

Bushey also has emerged as a strong pro prospect behind the plate, owing much of his success at the new position to assistant coach Dusty Lepper.

"My quickness and arm strength make it a good position for me but the hardest adjustment has been the balls in the dirt, because I'm used to picking them up instead of blocking them with my body," says Bushey.

At the plate, Bushey has evolved into what he calls "a classic college hitter," capable of laying down a sacrifice bunt (he leads to the team with 10) or driving the ball over the fences.

An Academic All-America candidate with a 3.40 GPA as a finance major, Bushey acknowledges that his parents Mike (a dentist) and Marty (a lawyer) deserve their due in that department.

"My parents always instilled the importance of academics in me and I feel well prepared for life after baseball," he says. "Notre Dame is a great place in so many ways and I'm starting to get more appreciation for what a Notre Dame education can do for you later in life."

If ever there were a player who embodied the virtue of "a leader, yet ever a follower," it would be the two-time Irish captain.

"Andrew has that great balance as a person, where he can be caring and compassionate but also very tenacious on the field," says Stanley, whose groomsmen at his recent wedding included Bushey and Meyer.

"I respect Andrew so much and would do anything for that kid. He's become a special part of my life here at Notre Dame."

## THE COMIC RELIEF

Righthander **Drew Duff** could be remembered as much for his memorable pranks and humor as for his hard-throwing competitiveness, which has yielded some of the most important outings by any ND reliever this season.

In the first few weeks of his college career, Duff pitched versus Florida International and had the rare experience of serving up three consecutive home runs. After the P.A. announcer had informed the crowd that the feat was a first for the FIU program, Duff's teammates were concerned.

"We thought his confidence would be shot," remembers Stanley. "But Drew just came over to the dugout and said, 'Hey, I'm in the record book.' That's one thing about that kid, he'll always take the mound with a lot of confidence looking to blow the ball by guys."

Duff also has "initiated" Steve Sollmann and Grant Johnson during their freshman seasons in the past two years, by telling them after a game that a reporter was outside the clubhouse waiting for an interview. Earlier this season, Duff clued Sollmann in as he led Johnson into the prank – with the pair getting a quality laugh from the doorway as they watched the unsuspecting rookie approach what in fact was some random fan and start talking to him about the game.

The laughs came back in Duff's direction earlier this week, when he injured himself taking a

hack as a pinch-hitter in the blowout win over Detroit (just moments after starting a 4-6-3 double play as the reserve second baseman).

"Drew will be taking a lot of ribbing for a while" promises Bok. "I've never seen anyone 'swing out of his kneecaps' quite like that."

Duff – who was a four-year starting shortstop/pitcher as a prep – has closed his career with a team-best 1.86 ERA in 2002. His many clutch outings include five relief innings at West Virginia to help bail the Irish out of a 5-0 hole, while facing the possibility of an 0-5 start in BIG EAST play (ND went on to win 10-6 in 10 innings, launching the current 30-4 run).

"The biggest difference this year is that I've learned more how to pitch, listening to what (pitching) coach O'Connor always tells us," says Duff, who may embark on a coaching career of his own some day.

"It meant a lot to help the team at West Virginia, in such a tense situation. It gave the team the sense that we could pull it out and that was a big turning point in our season."

## THE SMILE

If the Irish baseball team ever were to perform a rendition of "Alice In Wonderland," one casting call would be a no-brainer, with Meyer as the Cheshire Cat.

Sporting an infectious grin that matches his inner attitude, Meyer has encountered plenty of reasons not to smile during the past few years. His final two seasons – after a breakthrough 2000 season – have been hampered by a painful shoulder problem, one which he fittingly refuses to use as an excuse for his statistical dropoffs.

But Meyer's biggest challenge in life occurred just months before he attended his first class at Notre Dame, when his father Rudy died suddenly in the prime of his life. In the four years since that tragic event, Meyer has rarely talked to his teammates about his father, who remains a daily inspiration for his son.

"Who I am and what I've done my whole life is because of what my dad has given me," says Meyer. "He's a huge part of who I am and I work hard every day to make him proud. I know that he will be smiling down and proud of me on Sunday when I graduate. He'll be with me, he just won't be at the Joyce Center."

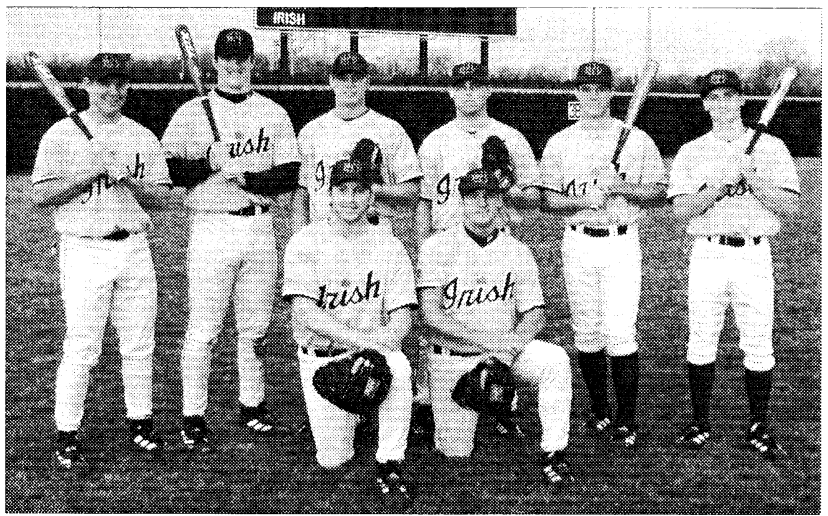
Rudy Meyer's support for his son started with academics and that guidance has paid off, with Meyer posting a Dean's List semester last spring as a civil engineering major (he next will be attending the University of Cincinnati as a master's student in structural engineering masters, before moving onto a possible career with a design firm).

"My dad wasn't the type of person who would talk bad about other people and he took whatever happened in stride, knowing there was nothing he could do about it and he'd just go on," says Meyer.

"And that's how I've approached dealing with the loss of my dad. I've just had to make the most out of it and go on."

The 2001 NCAA Regional at Mississippi State was a landmark event for the Irish baseball program but it also provided a uncomfortable distraction for Meyer, as the time coincided with the anniversary of his father's death. He struggled at the plate throughout the five NCAA games but encountered an understanding coach that helped soothe the pain.

"When I told coach Mainieri what I was going through, he was so caring and understanding," says Meyer. "That still means so much to me. There aren't many coaches who care as much about their players or are the type of father figure



**Notre Dame Baseball's 2002 Senior Class:** (kneeling, from left) Paul O'Toole and Andrew Bushey; (standing, from left) Ken Meyer, Matt Strickroth, Matt Buchmeier, Drew Duff, Matt Bok and Steve Stanley.

that coach Mainieri is for this team."

Meyer's courage in attending college so far from his native Florida, just months after his father's death, puts his career in greater perspective. And he's been more than up to the task of providing memorable moments for the fans of Notre Dame baseball.

During the 2000 season, Meyer turned in a huge series versus St. John's (8-for-12, 18 total bases) that included three doubles, two triples and a home run.

"I was hitting behind Ken during that series and I can remember the catcher and the umpire saying that they'd never seen a hitter have a week-end like that, just driving the ball wherever he wanted," remembers Stanley.

One year later, Notre Dame was on the verge of moving into the No. 1 ranking but faced a 4-2 deficit in the ninth inning versus Central Michigan. Three straight batters reached with 2-out, 2-strike pitches – before Meyer launched an 0-2 pitch into the night and over the leftfield fence for the 6-4 win.

Days later, following a sweep of Villanova, the Irish ascended to the No. 1 ranking.

## THE ENFORCER

O'Toole is the commander of the Notre Dame infield and has fashioned a unique career, as the second Irish player ever to reach 30 home runs and 30 stolen bases (53, most ever by an ND catcher and sixth all-time). He also became the first Irish player ever to homer in four consecutive postseason games – doing so as a freshman and adding clutch postseason play in 2001 and '02.

When the Cal State Fullerton team showed up the ND pitcher after hitting a home run in the 2000 NCAAAs, O'Toole stood his ground, seemingly ready to take on the entire Titans dugout.

One year later, at the Regional in Starkville, a confrontation at the plate brought O'Toole continual boos for the rest of the weekend. He responded by winning over the crowd with his hustling play that earned a spot on the all-tournament team.

"That's the type of atmosphere that I feed off and I think it comes from growing up with three older brothers," says O'Toole, in reference to his siblings Philip, Patrick and Peter.

"All confrontations I've had here pale in comparison with those from growing up with my brothers. They toughened me up."

O'Toole's entire family will see him play today, for just the second time in his career. And what

they will see is a more mature brother and son.

"There have been a lot of turning points in my growth as a player but now I really feel in control of my game," says O'Toole. "It's good to be fiery and competitive to a point, but you have to know when to back off and when you it can hurt you."

## THE WORKER

When asked to speak about their classmates, every one of his classmates are quick to offer praise for Strickroth:

"Best team player I've ever been around," says Bushey.

"The hardest worker you'll ever see," adds Stanley. "He just goes the extra mile and is always ready to answer the call."

"He studies books on hitting but the fact of the matter is that when he connects, the ball goes a very long way," chips in Duff.

A second-generation Domer, Strickroth joined Bushey, O'Toole and Stanley as starters on opening day in their freshman season. Like Stanley (0-for-17), Strickroth endured a brutal 0-for-20 start but has gone on to deliver several clutch hits during his career.

Strickroth's highlight play fittingly involved his legs rather than his bat. Inserted as a pinch-hitter (and the potential tying run) in the title game of the 2001 NCAA Regional at Mississippi State, he was hit with a two-out pitch before watching O'Toole send a popup behind the second-base bag.

Running at full speed as O'Toole took his swing, Strickroth carried on to third base and passed Mainieri, who was watching what he thought was the final out of the season.

"All of a sudden there was this huge commotion and I knew that they must have dropped the ball," recalls Strickroth. "I slid home and our dugout was going crazy. I thought we would win for sure after that" (MSU then won on a solo home run).

Strickroth – whose playing time has tapered off since his rookie season – fittingly provides the final thoughts on the class of 2002.

"Everyone who comes to Notre Dame wants to play but I just feel blessed to play with these guys and help in any way I can," he says. "I have a lot of confidence in myself and we all have great belief in one another, which can be very valuable."

"Being from so far away, my classmates and teammates have basically been my family for the past four years – and I couldn't think of a better way to have spent my college experience than as part of this baseball program."