



ALL-AREA: SC's Heath named baseball coach-of-the-year

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SEVEN SPRINGS -- Heath Whitfield has some big shoes to fill.

His father, Doyle, was a legendary baseball coach for three decades at Southern Wayne before he retired and has the athletic complex named after him.

Now, in his ninth season at Spring Creek, those shoes are starting to feel a little tighter for Heath. The baseball-savvy son guided the Gators to their first Carolina 1-A Conference title since 2004 and a program-best, fourth-round appearance in the state playoffs.

Despite the season-ending loss to eventual state champ Whiteville, Whitfield doesn't see the season as a loss.

"My number one thing was to win the conference championship," said Whitfield, who has been selected as the 2015 News-Argus All-Area baseball coach-of-the-year.

"I really felt like this was a team that could do that -- we've been close in the last few years. I felt like this was the team that was going to get us over the hump. Also, we had sort of been stuck in the second round of the playoffs for six straight years. I was hoping that our group could get us at least past that."

This group, a senior-laden squad with first-team All-Area picks Chad Spurgeon and Allen Coor, came through this year. The Gators cruised during the final two weeks of regular-season and set the postseason bar higher for future SC baseball teams.

"We started real slow because we had a lot of guys still playing basketball," said Whitfield. "We lost our first three games and we just really didn't gel until later in the season."

The return of Spurgeon and third baseman Trey Hammonds during their Deacon Jones Invitational at Princeton solidified what had been a below-average defense, something Whitfield credits for their turnaround.

"Getting those two guys on the field was big," Whitfield said. "'Plus, we had some unexpected guys like Will Rouse step up for us on the mound."

Whitfield always knew he was meant to be a coach.

"It's in the blood," he said. "I went to school and after two years when they asked me what I wanted to major in, I said, 'well, I guess I'm going to be a coach.'"

He was presented an opportunity to join Southern Wayne, but ultimately turned it down. Despite being proud of his father's accomplishments, Whitfield wanted a chance at school where his father's name didn't loom over him.

"He was really like a local legend," Whitfield said. "I knew that I definitely wanted to go somewhere else down the road and do my own thing."

He didn't have to wander too far down the road to find Spring Creek, where his laid back demeanor has made him an endeared figure at the school for close to a decade.

"He just works well with all the players," Coor said. "He's had a long line of baseball in his career. I just like playing for him, he's a great coach. He doesn't get that mad at you. I've always enjoyed playing for him."

A man of faith, Whitfield brings that onto the field, having his players pray before and after games. It's a tactic that Coor says helped him calm pre-game jitters.

"That's one thing that's always going to stay with me," he added. "I just really like how it brings the team together."

When asked about that, Whitfield was pleasantly surprised to hear about how much it impacted his players.

"That's a good thing to know, because I didn't really know what some of the kids thought about it," he said. "I just do it because the Lord has blessed me and God has been good to me. I have a great group of kids.

"I don't know what else I would be doing if I wasn't coaching."

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