

**GRACEFFO ACE ON MOUND, McGHEE BEHIND PLATE, SHRINER OF, SZCZECH AT SHORT****Cougar Nine Looking to Learn From Last Year, Move Forward**

By DAVID B. CORBIN

*Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times*

Experience can be a good teacher and Head Coach Dennis McCaffery hopes that this year's Cranford High School baseball team will learn from the experience of falling just short in the Union County Tournament (UCT) finals and the Group 3 Championships game. After losing to Westfield in the UCT Championship, the Cougars went on to win the North 2, Group 3 title and Group 3 semifinal before bowing in an eight-inning classic to Allentown in the Group 3 Championship after a seven-inning scoreless deadlock at Toms River South High School.

"Last year we were able to have somewhat of a successful season. We left two championships on the board, the counties and the state final, which is always difficult to have to deal with. Last year is over. We try to learn from it and move forward," Coach McCaffery stated.

In order to have a successful season, a sturdy relationship between the pitching staff and the catchers would be essential. Senior Gordon Graceffo will head a group on the mound, which consists of senior Kevin Donovan and juniors Jeremy Ruka, Jake VanDamm, Jack Jarrosz and Andrew Donovan.

"Gordon had a good year last year. He did a nice job and we have a couple of other pitchers, who have varsity experience, so we are hoping that we are able to

be successful. Any type of success you have during the season starts with pitching. We are hoping that our pitchers can throw strikes, work ahead and be able to work on both sides of the plate and have command of the game," Coach McCaffery said.

In that classic game against Allentown, Graceffo, who will play for Villanova next year, pitched

hard working young man and he's really put in a lot of time on and off the season in the classroom and in the weight room. Hopefully he has a successful season here at Cranford and I am sure when the time presents itself for Villanova, he will put his focus there," Coach McCaffery said.

The Cougars do have two experienced catchers in junior Mike

includes Connolly (first), junior Tyler Szczech (shortstop) and junior Mike Meola (third).

"We had a bunch of kids who were on that team that played in the county final and the state final. We are hoping that type of experience they can carry over to this year. Pat Connolly has two years, Tyler Szczech had a good year last year and Mike Meola, as well. Here at Cranford, we want everybody to contribute. We want them to know that they have value, that everybody has a role here. That's the way we've always done it and that's the way we will continue to do," Coach McCaffery expressed.

Senior Sean Petrucci and sophomore Jake DeClerico will play second. Also in the mix are sophomore Jack Jarrosz (shortstop) and junior Chris Guiditta (third).

"We want them to really stress making routine plays consistently, give them three outs in an inning and just making sure that we play fundamentally sound baseball. Focus on knowing where the ball goes when the ball is hit to you and in the infield knowing what to do. And give each team that we are playing only 21 outs per game," Coach McCaffery added.

Junior Jamie Shriner, known as an offensive threat in his third year varsity, will occupy right field.

"Jimmy is a three-sport athlete, really a good kid, a hard-working kid and we are hoping he will continue to have success on the baseball field. He's a gamer," Coach McCaffery commented.

In centerfield would be junior Deandre Fieldhouse and sophomore Mike Murphy. Senior John Markese and sophomores Connor Katz (also third base) and Joe Meola are expected to patrol leftfield.

The turf field has its advantages, especially early in the season, but are there any disadvantages?

"I know we are able to practice when there's snow on other fields, so I would take the situation where we play on a field where we have to adjust only one time. I know where there are other teams that are struggling to get outside. We are fortunate to get this field. It was a community effort that a lot of people worked together to make this field a possibility. We are very appreciative of it and we are very happy. We will adjust to any field we have to play on when the time presents itself," Coach McCaffery said.

The Cougars will not be shy offensively.

"We are hoping that everybody has productive at-bats and are good in situational hitting. We want to make sure that we put the ball in play and we are always putting pressure on the opponent," Coach McCaffery commented.

Speaking of pressure, "We are going to be aggressive. You don't score from first base. You have to be active. We have some kids who can run. To be a good baserunner, you don't have to be fast. You have good instincts. You have to be able to read," Coach McCaffery pointed out.

The Cougars will plunge right into the rivalry thing with a road trip to Scotch Plains-Fanwood on Saturday, March 31, at 4 p.m. for the season opener then they will host Westfield on Thursday, April 5, at 4 p.m.

"This year's team so far has been working hard and we are trying to get ready for our first game this season with Scotch Plains on March 31," Coach McCaffery said.

David B. Corbin for *The Westfield Leader and The Times*

**CRANFORD COUGAR BASEBALL SENIORS...Pictured, left to right, are: John Markese, Pat Connelly, Gordon Graceffo and Sean Petrucci.**

magnificently for seven innings, allowing only a two-out triple in the first, hitting a batter in the fourth and yielding a two-out double in the seventh.

"Gordon is going to be going to Villanova and I am sure he's very excited about that. Gordon is a

McGhee and senior Pat Connolly, although Connolly has and will be expected to play first base.

"Obviously the catching we are fortunate enough to have several who are good catchers. We are hoping between our pitching and catching, we will be able to keep us in all the ball games," Coach McCaffery said.

Several veterans return to occupy the infield positions, which

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