DAWN OF A NEW DECADE

Owls Seek to Right Ship After Two Subpar Seasons
Owls look for improvement over last season

This season I think we’ve meshed and [we have] more team chemistry than any other team I’ve played on since I’ve been at Rice.

Braden Comeaux
SENIOR THIRD BASEMAN

"We did lose a guy in Andrew Dunlap who was very pivotal to our offensive success last year," Edwards said. "But we’ve got plenty of [new] guys to fill in those gaps that we may have lost last year ... We’ve gained more than we’ve lost, I think."

The Owls’ top-end starting pitching was a bright spot for last year’s team. Then junior Matt Cantorino and then-senior Evan Kravetz combined for a 3.00 ERA and 229 strikeouts in 166 innings. But Rice lost both pitchers in the 2019 MLB Draft. According to Braggia, filling their roles will be tough.

"It’s going to be difficult; [they’re] hard to replace," Braggia said. "[But] we’ve got what I feel is a pretty good core in terms of guys that are gonna get out there and perform."

According to Braggia, junior Alex DeLeon, a transfer from McMannan Community College, is poised to be Rice’s number one starter this year. Junior Kel Bordwine, who made nine starts last season, will most likely feature in the rotation as well. Braggia said the starting pitching after DeLeon isn’t set yet, though the Owls have several pitchers poised to make a leap this year.

Rice has also installed new hitting analytics technology in its batting cages. According to Edwards, it allows Rice’s batters to glean new insights into their approach at the plate.

"You can hit off the tee, live [batting practice], off the machine, or whatever, and all that kind of stuff," Edwards said. "It gives you instant feedback: you turn around, look at the screen, and you can make adjustments from there."

Braggia said that Rice has also installed new technology to assist pitchers that measures spin rate, velocity and pitch location. But according to Comeaux, Rice has achieved more than refinements to hitting and pitching approaches during this past offseason.

"Honestly, this season I think we’ve meshed and have more team chemistry I’ve played on since I’ve been at Rice," Comeaux said. "This year we’re a lot closer; all of us are really good friends. We just have a bunch of determined, hardworking people on our team this year. We all have the same common goal, the same mindset that we’re just going to take it one game at a time and do the best we can."
Every baseball player remembers when they first picked up the game. For most, it's playing catch in the backyard or hitting off a tee. But for Trei Cruz, junior shortstop on this year's Rice baseball team, his first baseball memory is everything but normal.

"I was in Tampa Bay, my dad was with the Devil Rays," Cruz said. "We were hitting and throwing [on the field] before a game, with a couple of other players and their kids. That was the first time I fell in love with the game; I wanted to go to every single game I possibly could."

Cruz grew up surrounded by baseball. His grandfather, José Cruz, spent 19 years playing Major League Baseball, mostly with the Houston Astros. His father, José Cruz Jr., was a starting outfielder on Rice's baseball team in the '90s and played on two different MLB teams over his 12-year career. Cruz’s uncle, Enrique, also played at Rice; he was the starting second baseman on the Owl's 2003 national championship team. Last but not least on the field is his brother, current Owl and sophomore outfielder Antonio Cruz.

According to Cruz, having such close familial ties to baseball wasn't always helpful.

"Having my grandfather and father play, there’s almost a target on my back," Cruz said. "A lot of kids put pressure on me, and I kind of grew up under pressure as well. But, I learned, at the end of the day, I’m not ... trying to do this or trying to be like him. I have my own path and my own style of play. If you play with pressure, you’re digging a hole for yourself. I just want to play a good game. And I stopped listening to all the outside noise about my family. Whatever happens, happens."

Cruz spent his childhood playing a variety of sports. He said he loved baseball and golf, in addition to baseball – Cruz played all three for as long as he could, but eventually realized that baseball was the sport for him.

"I can live without basketball and golf," Cruz said. "I just felt like baseball was something I always wanted to do."

The man you see today roaming the left side of the infield at Reckling Park looks right at home, almost like he’s lived every second of his life at shortstop. But according to Cruz, that wasn’t always the case.

"I grew up as an outfielder, mostly because my dad and grandpa played outfield," Cruz said. "Then in middle school, I started playing shortstop because we didn’t have one on my summer ball team. I made a couple of nice plays, and my coach told me I should play shortstop. My dad was all for it; he would tell me, ‘You can go from short to any other position, but you can’t go from outfield to infield as easily.’ So I started playing short, stuck with it and I love it.”

After his decision to attend Rice, which Cruz said was largely based on his ability to get consistent playing time as a freshman, the former outfielder turned shortstop was pushed out of position again. Three-year starter Ford Proctor played shortstop for Rice in 2018, and so to crack the upperclassmen crowded lineup, Cruz volunteered to play at second base.

"(Changing positions) didn’t bother me at all," Cruz said. "We had Ford at short my freshman year; he was a great player. And as a freshman, my goal was just to play, no matter where it was. It could have been in centerfield, catcher, wherever. I just wanted to play and get at-bats.”

He was able to do just that, starting 58 games his freshman year, all at second base. Cruz was named to the Collegiate Baseball Freshman All-American Team, led the Owls that season with 40 walks and was tied for the team lead with 45 runs batted in. He finished that season with a .279 batting average, including an eight-game hit streak and an impressive .955 fielding percentage.

Despite his success over the past two seasons, Cruz said he doesn’t think he’s achieved “superstar” status at Rice.

"I’ve always been taught to stay humble … I could be ranked the No. 1 player in the nation, and I still wouldn’t think I’m a superstar."

Trei Cruz JUNIOR SHORTSTOP

According to Rice head coach Matt Bragga, the question is not if Cruz will play in Major League Baseball, but when.

"Cruz is on a different level right now," Bragga said. "Having been around this game for so long … Trei is every bit of what a first-round pick looks like. He made a play yesterday in the six-hole, you just don’t see that play made. In batting practice, the way the ball comes off of his bat is just different.”

Following his senior year at Episcopal High School in Houston, the Houston Astros selected Cruz in the 5th round of the draft. This past May, Cruz was selected again, this time by the Washington Nationals in the 7th round. Instead of entering the minor leagues, Cruz opted to return to Rice, trying to repeat his uncle’s success and lead the Owls back to the College World Series.

"I don’t want to be consumed about me and the draft; I want to be thinking about where our team is, come May,” Cruz said. "I want to win a conference championship; I want to get to Omaha. Those are the things I have in mind for this season.”

As the presumptive three-batter-in-the-lineup and the captain of the infield, Cruz is a de facto leader of the 200 Owls.

"Trei’s been going, he’s become a great leader for our team," Bragga said. "The guys look up to him, in part because he is such a good player.”

But Cruz sees his job as more than that. According to Cruz, he needs to be an example for all of the younger players, including his brother, regardless of whether or not he’s playing well.

"I definitely think I’m one of the leaders on the team this year,” Cruz said. “There are a lot of young guys that look up to me, especially having a younger brother on the team who looks up to me a lot, I kind of look at everyone as my own brother. I just want to be the guy that lifts people up, whether I’m having a great game or not. I just want to be the guy that gets everyone going.”

Individually, Cruz continues to excel. Last week, Cruz was voted the USA Baseball Preseason Player of the Year in the league's head coaches' poll. His name was also mentioned on an NCAA list of player-of-the-year contenders at every position. Cruz said he's got his sights high for this season.

"I want to be Player of the Year; I want to be an All-American," Cruz said. "Every award a shortstop can possibly get, is what I am striving to get. Just shoot for the stars, and see what happens. And whatever awards come my way, I’m grateful for all of them.

"I’ve always been taught to stay humble, no matter what," Cruz said. "I could be ranked the No. 1 player in the nation, and I still wouldn’t think I’m a superstar. I always think I can be better, and I’m not in the big leagues yet. I could be [an] all-star in the big leagues, and I won’t even think of myself as a superstar. Because even then, I can always try to get better.”

Still, a player of Cruz’s caliber does have dreams, and he said his dreams include one shared with every amateur baseball player: the MLB draft.

"My whole life since I started baseball, I’ve always thought about the draft," Cruz said. "I don’t pressure myself with the draft, thinking about [specific] rounds or picks, but I always think about it. Because that’s my dream, to play Major League Baseball. And the fact that it’s so close, it’s so surreal that it’s happening so soon. But I don’t let it consume me. I just take it one day at a time, whatever we’re working on in practice, or whatever I need to work on that day. Whatever happens in the draft, happens in the draft, it’s not completely in my control and I’m just grateful to have the opportunity."

If the commissioner calls his name in May, and he decides to forgo his final season of NCAA eligibility, Cruz would be one step closer to becoming part of the fifth grandfather-father-son combination the MLB has ever seen.

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Before each Rice baseball home game this season, you can find junior pitcher Kel Bordwine playing ping pong at Baker College or dining at Raise Cain’s Chicken Fingers, where he always eats the same meal in a specific order. But once the game starts, you can expect to see Bordwine on the mound frequently, after he finished last season with a 3.69 ERA as opponents hit for a .258 average against him in nine starts.

Bordwine said he hopes to contribute to the team this season regardless if he starts or comes in from the bullpen.

“There should be a weekend guy, but obviously I want to fit in just somewhere and I want to just go out there and get outs. Whether it’s a short-on-strikeout bullpen session a couple times a week or a long time in the bullpen, it really doesn’t matter to me.”

Last year, Bordwine achieved one of his best performances of the season during Rice’s annual three-game series against the University of Houston in a battle for the Silver Glove Trophy. As a result of only allowing three base hits in a combined 6.2 innings, Bordwine was selected as the Most Outstanding Player for the series.

According to Bordwine, defeating Houston was very satisfying.

“Just beating [UT] at all was super sweet,” Bordwine said.

Even since he picked up a baseball and started playing T-ball at the age of four, Bordwine said he has consistently worked to improve his game. However, Bordwine said he realized in high school that he should have paid more attention to play Division I baseball.

“One day in high school I just decided I wanted to be good and I started throwing two three-ball one week and played after practice for two hours a day,” Bordwine said.

Going into this season, Bordwine said he has worked on two major components of his game in order to help solidify a spot in the starting rotation.

“Besides gaining velocity, I went back and added another pitch,” Bordwine said.

According to Bordwine, he added a slider to his pitch repertoire, which also consists of a fastball, changeup and curveball.

“Now, I put a lot of time and effort into getting a slider and being able to throw everything for a strike in all counts,” Bordwine said.

According to Bragga, Bordwine displays good work ethic and leadership skills.

“Bordwine just shows up to the yard and does his work,” Bragga said. “He’s a leader.”

Bordwine has made major strides in his time at Rice, improving from only appearing in five games out of the bullpen in his first season to making 17 total appearances in his sophomore year with a 4.37 ERA. According to Bordwine, his pregame rituals and locker room habits deserve some credit for his success.

“I’m very superstitious,” Bordwine said. “I wear the same clothes to bed the night before [each game] and then I eat Canes’ before [each game] in a certain order. I also love to play ping pong. [The locker room champ is Trei Cruz], but I’m second.”

According to Bordwine, the expectations for Rice are high going into this season.

“I think the sky’s the limit for us,” Bordwine said. “I think we are going to win Conference USA outright, but then obviously we want to win the tournament.”

**2019 TEAM RECORD**

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**SPORTS EDITOR**

**MADISON BUZZARD**

**SENIOR WRITER**

**SPENCER MOFFAT**

In the fall of 2018, Rice Athletics faced a difficult task: hiring a new baseball head coach in the stead of the legendary Wayne Graham. Rice ultimately selected Matt Bragga, formerly the coach of Tennessee Tech University, as its new head coach.

Last season, in his first year at Rice’s helm, Bragga managed a team which limped to a 26-33 finish. This year, Bragga will attempt to right the ship, starting the season with what Bragga said is an especially formidable non-conference schedule.

“Our non-conference schedule — I had an opposing coach tell me this — our non-conference schedule, there won’t be one tougher in the country.” Bragga said. “We’ve got [the University of] Texas, [Austin] three games — we’ve got Texas Tech [University] on the road three – and they’re ranked No. 3 in [the] preseason.

Bragga said he still feels hopeful about the team’s chances in the upcoming season.

“It’s a challenging nonconference schedule, there’s no doubt about it.” Bragga said. “But I think that’s why guys come to Rice. They want to play good opponents, to play good baseball. If you go out and play good in all facets of the game, we’ll have a chance to win all those games.”

Since he became the Owls’ head coach, Bragga said he has formed relationships with local Texas high school baseball coaches to develop recruiting pipelines.

“People always overrate [me not formerly recruiting in Texas], Bragga said. “[They say], ‘Oh, wow, you’ve never been in Texas in recruiting.’ All you gotta do is get to know people. And that’s what we’re doing. That’s our job. That’s the lifetime of our program. If you can’t recruit, you’re not gonna win.”

Bragga said he has gotten to know all the players on the team, especially junior shortstop Trei Cruz. According to Bragga, Cruz is a great leader both by example and by communication.

Alongside Cruz in Rice’s infield are two seniors: second baseman Cade Edwards and third baseman Brendan Comeaux. Bragga said the team relies upon Cruz, Comeaux and Edwards for leadership.

“Cade had four errors all of last year. Comeaux is a consummate baseball player, great guy ... really good player. Right now Trei is playing every bit of what I think first rounder looks like, at shortstop.”

**This year, we have a lot of returners on the team. So, you don’t feel like as a coach that you are starting over from ground zero.**

**Matt Bragga**

**BASEBALL HEAD COACH**

According to Bragga, one potential area of concern for the team this season is pitching. After last season, Rice lost its bulk of its innings pitched; former pitching ace Matt Graham. Rice ultimately selected Matt Bragga, formerly the coach of Tennessee Tech University, at ground zero.

“[I’m] not. Like, when we go over bunt defenses, the guys already know. When we go over cuts and relays, they already know them. The fall was really easy — easy the first week. [because] we worked really hard — but easier because of the experience our guys have within our system right now.”

Once the team has advanced past its difficult non-conference schedule, Bragga said Rice needs to show up against conference opponents to enhance the pedigree of Conference USA.

“We have a good league,” Bragga said. “I’ve always respected Conference USA. Florida Atlantic [University has] done really well for a while. This league needs Rice back. In order for Conference USA to be the perennial powerhouse baseball conference that it can be, Rice baseball has to be a factor. And that’s good; I like that. I think that’s important. And we’re going to be. But there are some really high quality opponents in this league.”

**Braga hopeful for Owl success in 2020**

**INFOGRAPHIC BY KATHERINE HUI AND MICHAEL BYRNES**

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**SENIOR WRITER**

**SPENCER MOFFAT**

“Kel Bordwine: The superstitious starter”

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