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Jordan Gore battles his way into prominent role with Gamecocks

By NEIL WHITE

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South Carolina infielder Jordan Gore

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- KEEP AN EYE ON:

VINCE FIORI: Pitcher, Junior

The left-hander had a solid summer in the Cape Cod League and carried it over to fall practice, when he pitched as well as anyone on the staff.

ALEX DESTINO: DH, Freshman

The ball flies off the bat of this left-handed-hitting slugger, who could bat in the middle of the lineup and become a big run producer.

TAYLOR WIDENER: Pitcher, Sophomore

The hard-throwing right-hander came up big as a freshman, and he's showing the kind of stuff that could make him the closer or the Sunday starter.

GENE CONE: CF, Sophomore

His fall play has cemented his role as the team's center fielder, as he looks to fill an important role defensively as the replacement for Tanner English.

CLARKE SCHMIDT/BRANDON MURRAY: Pitchers, Freshmen

The first-year right-handers seem to get mentioned in the same breath a lot, and they've impressed enough to be considered for significant innings.

Neil White

The start of fall practice began with a declaration from South Carolina baseball coach Chad Holbrook, who insisted the competition for the infield spots at second base, shortstop and third base would be open despite the return of starters Max Schrock, Marcus Mooney and DC Arendas.

Holbrook wanted to make sure that players such as sophomore shortstop Jordan Gore knew they weren't being locked out of the lineup. Gore took him at his word.

After the close of fall practice Monday, Gore had pushed his way into a more prominent role in the spring.

"He's opened the eyes of the coaches, and I think he has opened his teammates' eyes, too," Holbrook said. "Last year, we knew he had a great skill set. He was long and lean with a great arm. He was just playing behind a kid who was polished. He had a point to prove to me and his teammates. And he has proven it."

The 6-foot, 165-pound Gore, a former Conway High standout known for his strong arm and high-octane playing style, embraced the challenge when he returned to school in August. He was determined not to concede anything to Schrock, Mooney and Arendas.

"We're all good buddies out there. We go out and mess around, but when it comes down to competition time, we're going to compete against each other," Gore said. "I love competition. That's what drives me. Battling it out is fun. It pushes you to be better."

Last season in 33 games (14 starts), the switch-hitting Gore posted a .226 average in 62 at-bats with two homers and six RBIs. He proved to be a capable fill-in at second base when Schrock was injured. And he drew attention with a walk-off home run in the 14th inning of a 3-2 victory over Tennessee.

He played over the summer with the Florence RedWolves in the Coastal Plain League, where he batted .262 with 22 RBIs in 43 games. His commitment to get better and come back to earn more playing time has impressed Holbrook.

"We had some frank discussions after last season before he went off to play summer ball. To be honest, I doubted whether Jordan wanted to return or not," Holbrook said. "But he's one of those kids with the makeup to say, 'You know what? I'll prove to him that I'm one of his best players.' "

Holbrook compared Gore's hard-charging attitude to that of former third baseman Adrian Morales, who helped lead the Gamecocks to back-to-back national championships in 2010-11.

"You need that to play here, and you need that to play in this league. That's why he's going to find himself a place on the field for sure," Holbrook said.

"I hate losing," Gore said. "It's awful, just awful. I'd rather do anything than lose."

While Gore has primarily battled Mooney for starting shortstop, he's versatile enough to play the other infield spots or left field if Holbrook wants to get both of them in the lineup.

"Marcus and Jordan have learned a little bit from each other. Jordan will be the first to tell you that he's learned a lot from Marcus," Holbrook said. "I'm lucky to have two really high-level shortstops. They're both going to play, and they're both going to contribute."

Gore said he has gotten stronger and feels much more comfortable after a year's worth of experience at the collegiate level. He believes the Gamecocks, who finished 44-18 in 2014 after losing the NCAA regional at Carolina Stadium, can have a big season. He hopes to be a catalyst this time around.

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