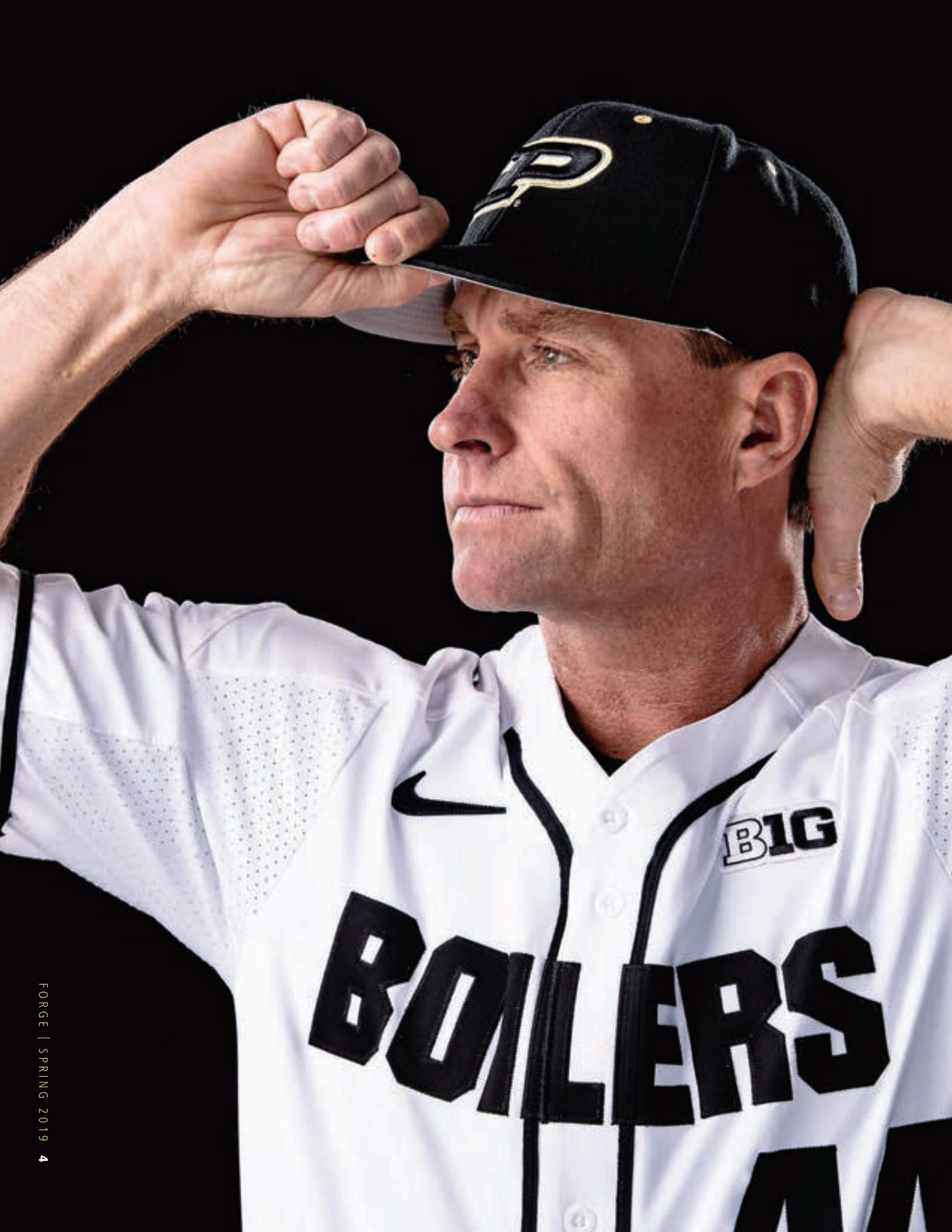


FORGE







CULTURE CLUB

WASIKOWSKI HAS ENGINEERED BASEBALL TURNAROUND

By Tim Newton

Mark Wasikowski wanted to know what he was inheriting, so he started his first Purdue baseball practice with an infield/outfield drill. He sent a fungo to left field, and the outfielder's relay missed second base by 20 feet. Immediately, teammates began hollering at the errant thrower.

Next man up, same result, same reaction. After five minutes, Wasikowski halted practice and brought everyone to the pitcher's mound.

"We're not going to do this," he told his team. "No more yelling and screaming. We need to get on each other's side. The only way we're going to win here is by pulling for our teammates."

The resulting change was dramatic. A Boilermaker team that went 10-44 in 2016 improved to 29-27 a year later, the greatest turnaround in program history. And the trend continued in 2018, as the squad went 38-21 and qualified for the NCAA Tournament for just the third time ever.



BUILT TOUGH

Mark Wasikowski is a high-energy, fiery competitor. That was never more evident than the championship game of the 1992 College World Series in Omaha, Nebraska, a game that his Pepperdine team won 3-2 over Cal State Fullerton.

In the first inning, Wasikowski tried to score from second on an infield hit to short. He arrived at home plate at the same time as the ball, and as the rules at the time allowed, he attempted to bowl over the catcher. He flipped over the catcher, knocking the ball away, and was tagged out by the pitcher, although photographic evidence showed that he touched the plate first and should have been called safe.

A picture of the play serves as the avatar on Wasikowski's Twitter feed. It helped spur a new NCAA rule that forces runners to avoid those types of collisions, but it also had another byproduct.

"Years later, the catcher from Cal State Fullerton called me out of the blue and said that Ford had used a picture of the play in its 'Built Tough' marketing campaign," Wasikowski says. "Apparently, they hadn't received permission to do so.

"As a result, I got a free truck out of the deal."



CHANGES IN ATTITUDE

John Madia is director of baseball operations. He has plenty of history with the program, playing for coaches Joe Sexson and Dave Alexander. His son, Drew, was coached by Doug Schreiber. He has seen the turnaround firsthand, and says there's no secret to the success.

"Culture. Mark has created a winning culture through every drill and piece of instruction, and it has led to a belief that we will win here," Madia says.

"Regardless of who we're playing, we're going to play Purdue baseball. We're going to put pressure on the defense. We consider playing defense as offense with a glove. It's a new style of baseball in the conference, and people are taking notice of what is happening here."

SURF'S UP

Wasikowski (pronounced WOZ-uh-COW-ski, but commonly shortened to "Waz") grew up in Seal Beach, California, where there were two daily pursuits – baseball and surfing. He played for the Los Alamitos Bronco baseball team that captured a World Series title in 1983, and went on to play in high school on a team that included former major leaguers J.T. Snow, Robb Nen and Greg Pirkel. (Must have been

a tough league ... the team finished fourth in the conference.)

He continued his baseball career at Hawaii, but left after one season. After a year at Santa Ana College, he spent his final two collegiate seasons at Pepperdine. The Waves won the 1992 College World Series, and Wasikowski was a two-time All-West Coast Conference selection at third base. The Milwaukee Brewers drafted him in the 35th round in 1993, but he decided it was time to hang up the cleats.

"I always felt like I was late, and it seemed like I was chasing ghosts trying to get to the major leagues," Wasikowski says. "I wanted to get my degree and go work on Wall Street. My dad had invested so much into my career that (leaving baseball) dissolved our relationship for a while, but it's better now than ever."

Wasikowski never made it to New York. His coach at Pepperdine, Andy Lopez, suggested he pursue a secondary education certificate. Even though Wasikowski had no intention at the time of coaching, he went along with the idea, serving as an assistant as his high school alma mater during the day and bartending at night.



His coach at Santa Ana, Don Sneddon (the all-time winningest coach in California community college history), then called and asked if his former player would be interested in a job at Southeast Missouri under coach Mark Hogan. Wasikowski said yes, and he drove the next two days to the start of his new career.

BUILDING A RESUME

Wasikowski spent two seasons at SEMO, where he earned an MBA and met his wife, Lori. Lopez then hired him on his staff at Florida, and he followed his former coach to Arizona for a 10-year run. He left there for a five-season stint under George Horton at Oregon.

In his 20 years as an assistant coach, Wasikowski's teams qualified for 14 NCAA Tournament appearances. He helped coach 130 players that were selected in the Major League Baseball Draft, with 33 of them making the big leagues. In 2012 and 2013, the scouting service Perfect Game named him among its national lists of 10 assistants "ready to lead."

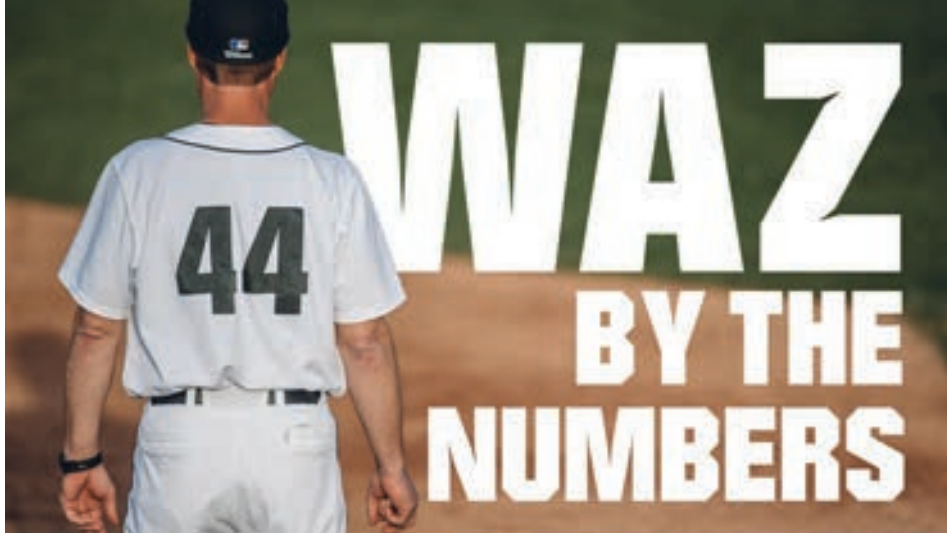
That opportunity came in 2016. When Schreiber stepped down at the end of the season, Wasikowski felt the time was right to make a move.

"I was not interested in anything other than a job at a Power 5 conference, because I wanted the chance to win a national championship," Wasikowski says. "I was looking for a school that was committed to winning, and not just somewhere that was participating. Purdue checked all the boxes."

With the blessing of his wife and daughters, Joelle and Kelsey, Wasikowski moved his family and took over the reins in West Lafayette, beginning the process of rebuilding a program that had won the Big Ten Conference championship in 2012. While he is still learning the history of the university and its athletic programs, he wants to walk a line between being respectful of the past and not being burdened by perceived restraints.

"Coming from the outside, I see things a little differently," he says. "I look at our academics and our facilities, and I envision tremendous opportunity. It's a place that can explode, and the only thing that can hold it back is people who aren't on board."

"We're not going to make progress unless we believe we can play for conference and national championships here. I think the culture has improved, and I'm looking forward to see what we can achieve in year three." ✕



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