Bragg given reason to brag with skilled game

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For the first time in six years, Wheeler’s baseball team reached the state playoffs, and much of the reason for that shift of fortunes came from one player: Sam Bragg.

Not only did Bragg finish the season batting .500 with nine home runs, 27 RBIs and a .629 on-base percentage, he posted a 2.69 ERA and 8-3 record from the mound.

“All four years that he has been here, he’s been disciplined at the plate and has had a good eye,” said Jeff Milton, the first-year Wheeler head coach who had served as an assistant to former coach Dave McDonald. “He’s not afraid to work deep in counts and try to work himself into a good situation. But he’s OK to walk.

“We talked a lot about that this year. Being the main power-hitter on our team, we had an idea that he would lead the team offensively, but he has to be OK to take some walks. And he was fine with that, to be a team guy and get on base.”

For his ability to help lead the Wildcats to the postseason and get on base at a high rate, Bragg is the 2011 Marietta Daily Journal/Cobb County Baseball Player of the Year.

“It’s a great honor,” he said. “There are so many top players around the county now that have won it. It’s a great feeling.”

Although Bragg succeeded at the plate, he was also a crucial piece to Wheeler’s rotation. In the first round of the state playoffs, Bragg threw a one-hit shutout against Duluth, taking a no-hitter through 6 2/3 innings.

Going forward, even as good as he was at the plate, Bragg wants to focus on improving as a pitcher.

“My main focus is on pitching, which is what I work on for the majority of our practices,” Bragg said. “From a pro standpoint, it will be a pitching thing.”

Bragg admitted the Wildcats’ lineup had its share of struggles through the season, which
led opposing pitchers to pitch around Bragg and try to make him hit bad pitches. But Milton was able to make one key adjustment — moving Bragg from No. 3 in the batting order, up a spot to No. 2.

Though the change, on the surface, may not seem like a big one, it creates a big shift in the early stretches of the game.

“It’s tough to walk the No. 2 guy to lead off the game,” Milton said. “As far as the rest of the team goes, it puts them in a chance to be successful, where they can drive in runs and, ultimately, make the team more successful. And we saw 17 wins this year.”

The ultimate benefactor of the lineup shift may have been sophomore outfielder Alan Peters, who finished the season with 26 RBIs after hitting .467 with a 545 on-base percentage.

“Basically, (Bragg) got walked so often that we moved him to give him more pitches to hit,” Peters said. “It actually helped me because he was on base so often that I would get more pitches to hit because they didn’t want to have two runners on base.”

Though Bragg’s ability to get on base impacted Peters’ success this season, it’s also possible that Peters’ success aided Bragg.

“They kind of played off of each other,” Milton said. “If Al doesn’t hit the way he hit this year, then Sam may not get as many hits this year.”

Bragg was also able to do the little things that made a hitter important to a team. In a season where he hit .500 and reached base in three out of every five times he came to the plate, his two other appearances over those game were usually also productive.

“I don’t know how many at-bats or plate appearances he had this year, but he might have only had one of two all year where he didn’t have a productive at-bat,” Milton said. “He would still move runners over and get (sacrifice) flies.”

In the end, it was Bragg’s ability to get on base via walk that set him apart. Walks aren’t flashy, but they put runners on base and put pressure on opposing defenses. As a result of Bragg’s plate discipline, combined with his hitting ability, Wheeler was able to consistently put pressure on the opposition.

“If you have runners on, especially in high school baseball, you have a great chance to win,” Milton said. “It’s tough to do. It could have been really difficult because everybody knew coming into this year that (Bragg) would be our offensive guy and our team leader as far as the offense and pitching. He didn’t get a lot of great hitters’ pitches. He had to make his own at-bats good by working hard, fouling off pitches and earning walks.”

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