

BASEBALL

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Bulldogs close in on title

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AUSTIN FILE

- **Mascot:** Bulldogs
- **Coach:** Randy Ursery, seventh season
- **2009:** 21-10 overall, 13-4 in district, four-way co-district champions
- **2010:** District 23-5A member with Clements, Elkins, Bush, Kempner, Fort Bend Marshall, Hightower, Willowridge, Bush, Dulles and Travis.
- **Next up:** Kempner, 7 p.m. Friday at Fort Bend Austin
- **Key players:** Shortstop Taylor Cobb, catcher Matt Hills, pitcher A.J. Glasshof and left fielder Eric Schweiger

Fort Bend Austin was one game out of first in District 23-5A last week, pretty impressive considering the offensive questions the team began this season with after several key players graduated.

Even better, the Bulldogs were coming off a sweep of Clements – the very team still clinging to its slim district lead going into this weekend.

But whether or not they catch the Rangers before Friday's finale, they're in position to return to the playoffs with a top-three seed after ending a five-year drought with last year's four-way tie for the title.

And that's all that matters to seventh-year coach Randy Ursery.

“Nothing's guaranteed yet, so we're going to have to have that win-or-go-home mentality this (past) week, and that will hopefully put us in the playoffs going into that last game against Kempner,” Ursery said.

This season's race has been almost as tight as the last. Going into the final four games, four teams were within two games of Clements. Last season, the four playoff qualifiers tied for first place.

That meant Austin was finally back in the postseason regardless of what happened in what's becoming an annual district seeding tournament, a nice change of pace for Ursery.

“Three times we had tied for the final playoff spot and then been eliminated in a playoff, so it was nice to finally get over that hump, and feel like we were back where we were earlier when we were pretty much an annual participant,” he said.

“So it was really big, good for the whole program, and our kids came back into this season with a lot of confidence.”

That was important given the Bulldogs' losses at the plate, which recently has been underscored by what four players are doing for their college teams this season.

Ryan Dalton (UTSA), Barrett Barnes (Texas Tech), Daniel Rockett (UTSA) and Blake Doerr (Houston Baptist) headlined a group of seven starters who graduated, along with Drew Miller and Tony Gigliotti.

All six had were great at the plate, giving the Bulldogs a dangerous lineup from the first to the ninth batter. The four in college hit home runs on back-to-back weekends in April, some more than one.

“We felt like we were going to be better with pitching depth. I thought we'd be improved over last year. And defensively, I thought we would be about the same,” Ursery said.

“But offensively, yeah, we were expecting a huge dropoff.”

Fortunately, that hasn't been the case.

Returning starters catcher Matt Hills, pitcher A.J. Glasshof and left fielder Eric Schweiger all are hitting over .300, with Schweiger sporting a .404 batting average and 31 RBIs through 29 games.

They've also had help from several newcomers, including junior shortstop Taylor Cobb, who was hitting a sizzling .591 with a team-high 40 RBIs in his first season up from the junior varsity team.

“He's been a great surprise,” Ursery said.

Glasshof's play hasn't been surprising, and ultimately he'll be at the center of any success Austin has in the playoffs.

The senior has avoided injury this year, helping him excel offensively – he DHs when not pitching – and on the mound, where he rarely walks people and has good velocity and command of three pitches.

“He has been everything that we'd hoped he'd be,” Ursery said. “He's somebody that's going to be dependable at the top of your pitching rotation and every game you play he's going to give you a chance to win, no matter who it is, and he's done that.

“He's a very hard-nosed competitor, and when he goes out he wants to win. It doesn't matter if he's playing in summer ball or a pick-up game in seventh period.”

Returning pitcher Scott Duncan and Cobb give Austin solid depth behind Glasshof. Senior Matt Prickett, another JV promotion, also has thrown well, recently earning a win over Hightower.

Other newcomers who've helped the Bulldogs this season include junior first baseman Anthony De Jesus and senior centerfielder Eric Hughes, who recently signed with Stephen F. Austin.

Together, the Bulldogs put together a five-game winning streak going into last Tuesday's game with Bush, a sign that they're turning around their up-and-down start to the season exactly at the right time.

“Early in the year, we were either playing really well and getting all the breaks, or we were giving them to the other team,” Ursery said. “Since then we've won with timely hits and good pitching.

“We're playing pretty good baseball right now,” Ursery said. “I don't know if we're playing great baseball but we're playing pretty well.”