

Senior catcher acts as spiritual leader for Heels

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Two flat-screen TVs hang black and silent in the North Carolina baseball player's lounge. An abandoned game of pool sits forgotten in the corner.

Twenty Tar Heels bow their heads in unison, as a Southern accent comes from the front of the room.

"I want to go ahead and open up with a prayer before we get started."

Dustin Ackley, already halfway into his uniform at 10 a.m., has his shoulders bowed. Garrett Gore, who looks as though he's still halfway in bed, gazes downward. Head coach Mike Fox quiets the buzz of a call on his cell phone.

And they listen to Mike McKee.

It's just three hours before game time on a potentially season-defining day for the team. A win would mark UNC's first three-game sweep of an ACC opponent in 2009, and it would make a big statement coming against a Top-10 school in Miami.

But, like Fox's incoming call, the Hurricanes can wait 20 minutes.

First, they will listen to Mike McKee.

Since the team doesn't have time to attend church before Sunday games, they have their very own aspiring pastor to lead them in prayer and reflection.

"I think a lot of them really understand my heart, just coming from an actual player's perspective," said McKee, a senior catcher for the Tar Heels.

"It's a really neat experience for them to see a peer being able to talk through it with them and not just talk at them," he said.

Fox knows how effective these sessions can be for the student-athletes on his team, and even for himself and his staff.

"I learn from Mike McKee every time he opens his mouth," Fox said. "He is a person that doesn't talk about his faith; he lives his faith. I watch all the other players in there, and if they paid attention in class like they do in chapel, we'd have the highest team GPA in the country."

But things weren't always this clear for McKee.

His spiritual journey hit a speed bump during the transition into his freshman year at UNC, as he struggled early in the classroom and on the field.

McKee sat in his dorm and tried not to break down. So he did the only thing he knew how to do.

"I just sat there, and I was like, 'God, why do you have me here?'" McKee said. "'I don't understand. Why, why, why?'"

It was a predicament not unfamiliar to the McKee family. Mike McKee Sr. also played college athletics, but his sport was basketball at UNC-Wilmington.

He, too, turned to his faith during troubled times.

"I realized that the big picture was more than just basketball in my life, but it was about living my faith and telling others about my relationship with Christ," said McKee Sr., who is a pastor at Biltmore Baptist Church in Arden. Once the elder McKee made peace with his life off the court, he went on to have a successful college basketball career. Years later, his son reached a similar conclusion.

"It was interesting to see over the course of that year and up until now why God did have me here," McKee Jr. said. "And it's not to play baseball. It's to be able to talk about my faith and proclaim God's name."

After making that realization,

McKee had the peace to get back in the batting cages and figure out what was wrong with his swing.

So he hit balls.

He hit balls before practice, and he hit balls after practice. Then he caught a bullpen session, and then he hit some more balls.

The only time McKee wasn't hitting balls was during games. He has stepped to the plate only 17 times in four years. He has five career hits and two RBIs.

The rest of the time he's sat and watched. And caught some more bullpens.

His workmanlike approach was evident from the beginning.

Starting in fourth grade, McKee dragged his father to the diamond every day at 5:30 a.m. to work out before taking the bus to school.

But he knew that by the time he reached college, his physical limitations would start to outweigh his work ethic.

He was left with a choice: star at a small school or likely ride the bench at the school of his dreams. For a kid raised in UNC jumpsuits and Air Jordans, it was a no-brainer. "I've always said that I'd rather take my chances fighting for a position on the No. 1 team in the nation than I would going and fighting for my position on an unranked or smaller team," he said.

Though he hasn't cracked the starting lineup, his impact has been felt in other ways at UNC.

Garrett Gore has felt it.

"Mike pretty much saved my life, because I was headed down the wrong path," Gore said. "He's just one of those special people that really come and change your life."

Mike Cavasinni has, too. Weekly meetings with McKee helped him through long periods of injury.



Mike McKee, whose father is a pastor, gives Sunday sermons for the Tar Heels on game days.

Though he's been able to help so many others find peace, McKee insists that he's no different from any of them.

"I want to make a point that I don't have it all figured out, and it's not that I have it all together," he said. "I'm just a man pursuing my best friend, and his name is Jesus."

Occasionally, though, McKee puts such godly pursuits on the backburner, whether to make YouTube music videos or prank call hotel rooms.

"Hey, this is Charles from the front desk," McKee will say. "I want to call and apologize, but we didn't change the sheets in your room. Do you mind putting them outside?"

Still, he says his primary purpose on the Tar Heels is manifested on Sunday mornings.

This Sunday, McKee closed chapel with another quick prayer.

At game time, he took his seat in the dugout, where he remained for the duration of the contest. UNC went on to win and complete the crucial sweep of the Hurricanes.

Had his number been called, McKee would have been ready. A quick glance at the 2 Corinthians verse on his bat and he would have stepped to the plate.

Maybe he would have gotten a hit. Maybe not. Either way, he knows it doesn't matter in the end.

He believes his number has already been called by a higher power.