

Closer Jackson Lamb finally thriving as Michigan tackles Oklahoma

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Michigan closer Jackson Lamb has 14 strikeouts while giving up 10 hits and five walks in 17.1 innings this season.

Ann Arbor — It would be safe to say Jackson Lamb has endured more than his share of adversity during his baseball career at Michigan.

And that is why Lamb is enjoying this season so much as a dominating closer for the Wolverines.

Michigan coach Erik Bakich hopes he will be able to put Lamb in closing situations when the No. 23 Wolverines host No. 11 Oklahoma in a three-game series, which gets underway Thursday at Ray Fisher Stadium.

So, what type of problems has Lamb had to overcome? He suffered a back injury his freshman year, Tommy John surgery as a sophomore and broken ribs last season.

Lamb (6-foot-6) feels better than ever and his production backs it up. He has yet to give up an earned run in 15 appearances, going 2-0 with eight saves, 14 strikeouts, 10 hits and five walks in 17.1 innings for a sub-.1.000 WHIP.

“Just being able to go out there has been big,” Lamb said Tuesday night after Michigan pulled out a 13-inning 2-1 win over Eastern Michigan. “I’ve had three injuries since I’ve been here, only thrown like 20 innings before this year. I had a back injury my freshman year, Tommy John my sophomore year, then I came back last year and had eight innings under my belt when I broke three ribs and was out for the rest of the season.

“It was very frustrating, but I come to the locker room every day where I know my best friends have my back. The whole team atmosphere really helps everything. I have 35 of my best friends in there.”

Lamb’s fastball was in the low 90s Tuesday when he worked 2.1 innings, striking out four while walking one against Eastern Michigan, a game that was decided with a walk-off hit by sophomore Jonathan Engelmann.

“It’s all about mindset,” said Lamb of Michigan’s 26-7 record (6-3 in Big Ten play). “We’re now competing against ourselves, trying to run our best race every time we come out here regardless of who the opponent is.

“Our mentality is our strength. We won in 13 innings (Tuesday) and we knew we had every chance to win the game. Just that mindset of knowing we’re never out of the fight, just that mentality that we have and everyone has it.”

The Wolverines are hitting .292 as a team and averaging seven runs a game, led by sophomore second baseman Ako Thomas (.346, 30 runs), sophomore designated hitter Nick Poirier (.333), senior shortstop Michael Brdar (.313), Engelmann (.309), senior center fielder Johnny Slater (.302) and junior third baseman Drew Lugbauer (.289), who leads the team in homers (nine) and RBI (42).

Michigan also has a solid pitching staff in juniors Alec Rennard (4-1, 3.41 ERA), Oliver Jaskie (4-1, 4.19), Michael Hendrickson (3-1, 4.25) and Ryan Nutof (3-1, 5.02). But make no mistake, Lamb is a huge factor in the Wolverines’ success and could be the difference in an NCAA Tournament appearance after last year’s late season collapse — with Lamb sidelined — cost them a shot at competing in the Big Dance.

“His path here these first three years couldn’t have gone more sideways with one speed bump after the next from a low back injury in his freshman year to Tommy John his sophomore year to the rib cage injury last year,” said Bakich. “He obviously came in with very high expectations as a huge prospect coming out of (Temperance Bedford) high school so I think for him this is a huge opportunity to have the experience at Michigan that he wanted to have and we all thought he would have minus the injuries.

“He already came in as a great character kid. His parents raised him and his sister very tough. His dad’s a former college football player and his mom works with the justice department, very strict household and he’s a tough kid. He’s come here and used all the adversity that he’s endured with the injuries and it’s made him even more resilient, even tougher and he’s been able to persevere and he’s thriving in the opportunity that he has now.”

Bakich isn’t making the Oklahoma series a do-or-die one, but a couple of Michigan wins could go a long way in a NCAA Tournament berth if the Wolverines come up short on winning the Big Ten tournament championship next month.

Oklahoma won a series against then-No. 2 Texas Tech earlier this month. The Sooners are led by Renae Martinez (.355), Brylie Ware (.348), Steele Walker (.346) and Jake Irvin (5-0, 1.30 ERA), who has 45 strikeouts and eight walks in 34.2 innings.

“You try not to go big picture on the team very often,” Bakich said. “We just try to stay pitch to pitch, but Oklahoma’s a great team and it’s going to be a heavyweight fight. We’re looking forward to it and it’s going to be a great test.

“I would love to pack the house here. I would love to see Ray Fisher 3,000 deep and standing-room-only, having a sea of people just piled in the overflow area down the first and third base line. I would just love to have an atmosphere here that would create a 10th man.”

Oklahoma at Michigan

Series: 4 p.m. Thursday-Friday, 2 p.m. Saturday, Ray Fisher Stadium, Ann Arbor **Records:** No. 11 Oklahoma 27-9; No. 23 Michigan 26-7

Outlook: The Wolverines and Sooners will be competing in a mid-season, non-conference series between top-25 teams. It could play a role when the NCAA Tournament pairings are announced during Memorial Day weekend in late May.