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45 Seasons and Counting for Bentley Baseball Coach Bob DeFelice

By: Marvin Pave

Bob DeFelice stood in the batting cage at the Red Sox minor league camp in Ocala, Fla., nervous, sweating, and not knowing what to expect from the authoritative voice analyzing his swing.

DeFelice, beginning his 45th season as the head baseball coach at Bentley University, at the time was a promising catching prospect out of Winthrop High and Boston College.

On that day in Ocala in the mid-1960s, he was being scrutinized by Ted Williams, and the legend characteristically didn't mince words.

“He asked me what my name was as I’m popping up, hitting weak grounders, and swinging and missing — boy was I shaking — and Ted said I should be back in Boston selling fruit,” recalled DeFelice, the first and only varsity baseball coach at Bentley.

“But he mesmerized me when we talked about hitting during lunch break. He was about 46 or 47 then and just had back surgery, and he could still step in the box and give a hitting clinic. I idolized him.”

So in the spring of 1969, when the new Bentley uniforms were delivered, DeFelice chose jersey number 9 in honor of Williams.

DeFelice has worn the single digit since the year Richard Nixon started his first presidential term, man first walked on the moon, and the New York Mets were dubbed “amazing.”

His first game as Bentley’s coach was April 21, 1969, a 3-2, 11-inning win over Boston State. Last Friday, the Falcons opened their season at the University of Tampa, facing the fourth-ranked Division 2 squad in the country, and pulled off a 5-3 upset.
It was the 684th victory for DeFelice, third in wins among Division 2 baseball coaches in New England behind Frank Vieira (1,127 at New Haven, 1963-2006) and Jim Stone (803, University of Massachusetts Lowell, 1967-2003).

“It’s hard to believe but here I am with more energy, more competitive fire, and more drive than I had 20 years ago, and that comes from being energized by my players and the Bentley community,” said DeFelice, the school’s athletic director since 1991.

“I'll be 71 on May 17 and I hope I’ll be on the field that day, because it will mean we’re in the postseason playoffs.”

His teams have finished in the top half of the Northeast-10 Conference 20 times in the past 32 years.

The Falcons, 28-23 a year ago, will open their home schedule at Robert DeFelice Field on March 20 against Northeast-10 foe Stonehill. The Falcons will sprinkle in 12 more games down South first.

Garry Keil, a senior on that first Bentley team, has thrown batting practice for the Falcons every year since his graduation, even traveling home during his time in the Army from 1969 to ’71 to help his former coach.

“Bob's been loyal to me and so I’ve been loyal to his program. He loves Bentley and loves what he does,” said Keil, who played baseball at Newton High.

“Bob turned 27 that season and on his birthday we beat Clark, 21-19. I was playing second base and came in to pitch when we were way behind and I got the win.

“After the game we ended up at the Chateau in Waltham where we had our usual postgame steak dinner,” said Keil, who threw BP last weekend at Tampa. “It was a learning experience for him back then and a unique situation. We had no home field, no recruits, and we still went 9-4 because we were a real team that pulled for one another.”

DeFelice’s current starting second baseman, senior Logan Gillis of Merrimack, N.H., expressed similar admiration.

“Coach is great with the fundamentals but even more important he teaches us to respect the game because of his passion for it,” said Gillis, who starred at Lawrence Academy in Groton. “He’s straightforward and he always has your back.”

Gillis was one of four Falcons — along with pitchers Lamarre Rey, a senior from Lynn; Connor Root, a sophomore from Nashua; and J.P. Ashline, a senior who played at Acton-Boxborough
Regional — who were teammates last summer on the Futures Collegiate Baseball League champion Nashua Silver Knights.

Ashline pitched four strong innings in the win over Tampa, while Gillis was hitting .500 (6 for 12) after last weekend’s Florida swing.

DeFelice, so talented that he caught as a 15-year-old in both the Boston Park League and Intercity League, is a strong proponent of summer baseball for his Bentley players. He is a member of eight halls of fame, including for those leagues, Bentley, and Winthrop High.

“I know summer ball made me a better college player,” said DeFelice, a three-sport athlete and baseball captain at Winthrop, where he was the varsity football coach from 1970 to ’86.

In that role, he guided the Vikings to a 101-65-2 record and two Division 2 Super Bowl wins. His teams posted a 33-game winning streak 1981 to ’83. His brother, Frank, was longtime football and baseball coach at Swampscott High.

DeFelice had the opportunity to sign with the Red Sox after his sophomore season at Boston College in 1961, when the Eagles, under coach Eddie Pellagrini, advanced to the semifinals of the College World Series.

“I chose to get my education and actually, I didn’t have a great senior season,” he recalled. “I had accepted a football coaching job at Christopher Columbus High in Boston’s North End, but then I had two great seasons playing summer ball and by that time was teaching and coaching in Winthrop.”

The Red Sox were again in pursuit and team vice president Dick O’Connell, who resided in Winthrop, arranged for DeFelice's leave of absence from the school system so he could play professionally.

DeFelice spent three seasons in the minors.

“I have no regrets. Some guys complain they didn’t get a fair shake. I just felt I had gone as far as I could go. I never envisioned I’d be coaching at Bentley for 45 years,” said DeFelice, who played and managed in the Intercity League till in his 40s.

“When all is said and done and you’ve taught them to play and respect the game, the best part of my job is sitting back and rooting for them.”