

THE RIGHT

UW pitchers have great command, but old-school grit has team eyeing Omaha

BY MIKE KORD
FOR GOHUSKIES MAGAZINE

The sun is setting early on this late-winter night, casting a shadow over home plate and southward down the right field line. Just beyond the outfield wall, the water of Lake Washington is a bright blue, and glacier-clad Mount Rainier inspires awe in the background. By any standard, the scene at Husky Ballpark is stunning.

Toeing the pitcher's rubber in the fading sunlight is Logan Gerling, and he's got his hands full. Crosstown rival Seattle University has just smoked back-to-back singles and a hard-hit lineout to right field, prompting a visit from catcher Michael Petrie. Early in this 2021 season, the Huskies are searching for a rhythm that will result in a deep postseason run. For the beat to last, however, it will come down to the pitching staff, a band of righties and lefties, local talent and recruits from afar. They throw hard, and then they throw you off with a sweeping slider away or a soft changeup in the dirt.

Through 14 games, UW pitchers have a 2.26 ERA, good for ninth in the nation and second in the Pacific-12 Conference, and the team had an 8-6 record heading into conference play. Leading the staff are ace Jack Enger, who grew up just across Lake Washington and attended Bellevue High School, and Gerling, who came to UW via Gig Harbor High School and Tacoma Community College.

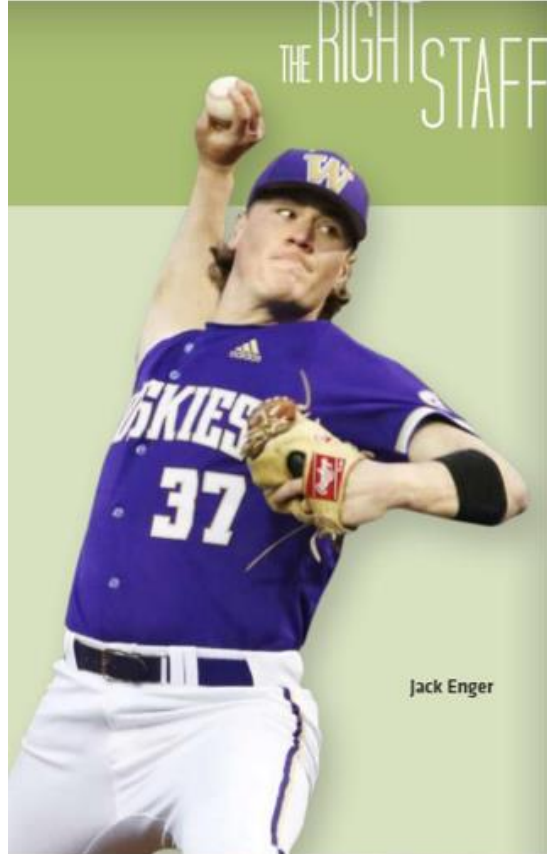
Petrie, the veteran behind the dish, is a Mercer Island High School grad. All three grew up wanting to be Dawgs. In high school, Enger starred as both a pitcher and a quarterback for the storied Wolverines football team. His father, Kyle, was a member of the UW crew, and his grandpa, Joe Ryan, was a tackle on the 1964 Rose Bowl squad. "I think I'd be written out of the family will if I didn't go to UW," said Enger, a 6-foot-4, 225-pounder who majors in sociology with a minor in sales.

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STAFF



Adam Bloebaum • Pitching
Michael Petrie • Catching



Jack Enger



Michael Petrie

Enger made just two relief appearances as a freshman in 2018, but established himself as a legitimate Pac-12 pitcher, going 3-0 with a 3.20 ERA as a sophomore. His ERA sat at a sparkling 1.88 when the 2020 season was shut down. So far in 2021, Enger is 2-0 with a 1.02 ERA. In 17 2/3 innings, he has 17 strikeouts. Opponents are hitting just .163 off him. "He's just a pure competitor and he loves to grind and he loves every single moment out there on the mound," Petrie said. "It's really infectious for the rest of the team. There isn't a person on the field who doesn't love to play behind Jack Enger."

Hitters stepping into the batter's box against UW are aware of one thing — they seldom know what pitch is coming. Enger, a former walk-on, is the prototype. Like many, he throws a four-seam fastball — but his has a natural cut that explodes in on the hands of a left-handed hitter as high as the low-90s. "I don't know where it comes from," Enger said with a laugh. "I think it's from all those years of football, being a quarterback and throwing the football like that." Or he might "pitch backward," which means throwing a changeup or slider early in the count. Commanding each of his pitches almost certainly will lead to being drafted in 2021.

"Jack's been great," Huskies head coach Lindsay Meggs said. "His numbers are off the chart. But even more so, he's been a great leader. He's really had outstanding composure and makeup from the time he got here, and he's learned a lot. And he really bought into what he has to do to get better."

For a pitcher to get comfortable throwing a variety of pitches, it's helpful to get uncomfortable first. Credit Meggs and pitching coach Elliott Cribby for that. The coaches routinely put their pitchers in an array of uncomfortable situations during intrasquad games, such as changing the count or putting runners on base. Which is good, because Gerling finds himself in a pressure situation on this idyllic night in early March. Never mind the scenery — he needs a groundball to get out of the inning. But Gerling doesn't have his best stuff. He knows it. Coach Meggs knows it. And Petrie, the fifth-year catcher, definitely knows it. Hence the visit. "Man, the one thing I truly admire about Petrie is even in tough situations, he always keeps it light with me," Gerling says. "He just reminds me that we're just playing a game, and if you aren't having fun, then you're not going to be able to succeed."

Five pitches later he induces that ground ball, which turns into a 6-4-3 double play. Gerling and Petrie jog back to the dugout. Terminology such as spin rate, arm slot and velo dominate the modern pitching conversation. But Gerling and his staff mates stand out for something additional: their old-school grit. "That's what we love about Logan," Meggs says. "Even when he doesn't have his best stuff, he just wills his way through four or five innings."

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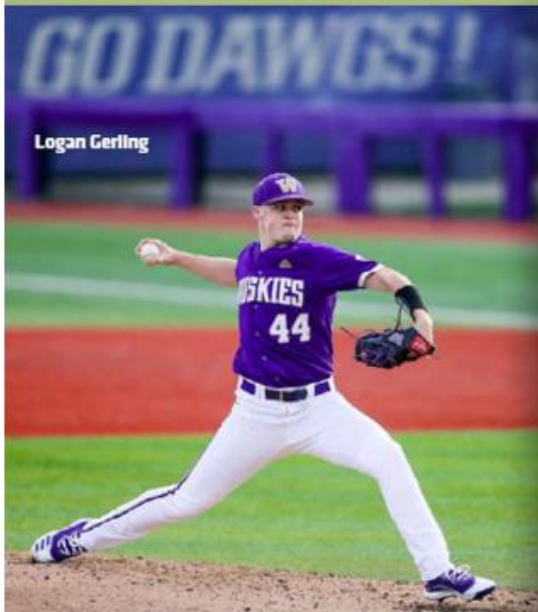


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Logan Gerling

Head Coach
Lindsay Meggs

Gerling would go four innings and allow one run in a 7-3 victory over Seattle U. He kept hitters off balance by mixing his speeds and hitting his spots with his fastball, curveball and newly developed changeup. "When I get the ball in my hand, I have a true belief that there is no one better on the field than myself," the right-handed cinema media major said.

After a successful high school career, Gerling was virtually ignored by Division I programs. He honed his game at Tacoma Community College, going 15-1 over two seasons before becoming a Husky. When the pandemic shut down the 2020 season, Gerling took advantage of the free time to develop his changeup. Through mid-March, prior to a three-game visit from the Southern Cal Trojans, the 6-0, 185-pound Gerling had recorded 18 strikeouts in 18 innings, for a 3.00 ERA and an opponents' batting average of .250. "In my opinion Logan has the best changeup on the staff," said Petrie, who recently graduated with a degree in communications and is currently working on a master's in education and athletic leadership. "It's really unique just because of the way it falls off the table and his ability to just throw it on any count. He's constantly keeping hitters off balance with it."

The Huskies lost two key pitchers from last season: starter Stevie Emanuels, a fifth-round draft pick by Oakland, and reliever Leo Nierenberg, who signed a minor-league contract with Cincinnati. Two newcomers are left-handers Adam Bloebaum, a transfer from Pittsburgh, and Tyson Guerrero. Yes, that Tyson Guerrero. In 2019 Guerrero was a pitcher/outfielder for rival Washington State. He belted two home runs, including one against the Huskies. "I actually came in to catch when he got that pinch-hit home run," Petrie recalled. "He put one up in the jet stream over in Pullman and it carried its way out. Yeah, we like to laugh about that old memory."

At 6-1 and 188 pounds, Guerrero uncoils every inch of his wiry frame and arguably throws harder than anyone else on the staff. In 6 1/3 innings, Guerrero gave up just one run, and opponents were hitting just .227. He was sidelined with a knee injury but is now healthy and ready to play in early- to mid-April. "Tyson has extremely lively stuff," Petrie says. "His fastball just has a lot of life to it and then he also has a really good curveball. When he's on, it's virtually impossible to cover both pitches."

The 6-6, 225-pound Bloebaum was named to the ACC All-Academic team in 2020. "Honestly I thought he was a senior when I first saw him," Petrie said. "Just the way he carries himself. He's extremely mature for his age." Success at the Division I level often requires command of three good pitches. Bloebaum has four: a four-seam fastball, sweeping curve, tight slider, and a good changeup. "He's been getting better every single time I see him pitch," Petrie said. "That's been really fun to watch."

In 2018, the program experienced unprecedented success with a remarkable late-season run that culminated in an appearance at the College World Series in Omaha. For the Huskies, it only heightened their desire for a return trip. "That's something we prepare for every day," Enger said.