

Veterans Jones and Walker to lead young Hawks in 2019 baseball season

by John Hough, Sports Writer
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CARROLLTON - Nathan Walker had spent his last dollar on a glass of Snapple apple juice.

To his right sat Gabe Jones, who was occasionally fighting the urge to doze off after the pair had participated in a hitting clinic outside in the snow.

They're also coming off a long and tough basketball season. Being multi-sport athletes is a grind, but Jones and Walker find solace when it comes to baseball, the sport they love the most.

“It’s the best,” Walker stated.

Close friends off the field, the two seniors had been on separate paths on the diamond for the last three years, but now they’re both solidified stars for the Carrollton Hawks coming into the 2019 season.

However, both admitted they’re counting down the days until their time in high school is over, but at the same wish the baseball clock could slow down.

“It’s weird because I still remember when I was a freshman playing sports for the first time with Cole Brannan and all those guys. It was really fun,” Jones said. “I’m kind of sad for the sports part of it to be over, but I’m ready for the academics to be over and I’m ready for college.”

The duo will play baseball at the next level on scholarships.

Walker will be Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology and plans to major in engineering while playing on the baseball team, which is a goal he’s had his sights on since he was ten years old.

“It’s been a passion of mine. I just love building things,” Walker said of pursuing an engineering degree. “Some kids from Carrollton go there. They talked to me about it and said it’s really good. They’re one of the top engineering programs, and their coach reached out to me and said he’d love for me to play on the team. It’s where I want to go.”

Jones is committed to play for Quincy University. An NCAA Division II college might’ve seemed off Jones’ radar from an outside perspective based on his production 12 months ago.

In terms of being in the spotlight, Jones is a late-bloomer. Through his first two seasons, he had minimal production at the plate and on the mound, but in the 2018 season, Jones finished with a 5-1 record and averaged two strikeouts per innings pitched. A 6-foot-3 right-handed pitcher, he throws a fastball that tops out at 88 M.P.H. while mixing in a changeup and curveball. To add to his sporting repertoire, Jones is a two-time first team all-WIVC basketball player.

Walker, who is an admirable lefty pitcher too, but is well known for his display at the plate.

It’s difficult to find an athlete in Illinois with more individual achievements than Nathan Walker. A three-sport athlete, Walker is a two-time all-state outfielder and a year ago claimed first team all-state honors in football as a wide receiver to along with two

consecutive seasons to being named first team all-conference. Walker batted 519. with 53 RBI and three home runs in 2018.

“It’s going to be tough to do what I did last year and try to show these kids how to stay focused during games and work all the time to make yourself better,” Walker said.

It’s also a new era for the Hawks program after graduating six seniors that were key contributors for the past four seasons winning regional championships every time. Jones and Walker, who are four-year varsity letterman, will help guide a young team and become leaders in the process.

“Me and Gabe have taken over the leadership roles,” Walker said. “Leading stretches, trying to get people to stay focused during drills, make good throws, all that kind of stuff.”

“You have to enforce what coach Krumwiede is preaching to us every day,” Jones said. “You have to make sure guys are buying into what he’s telling us to do and make sure that everyone is on the same page and going for the same goal, which is to win a regional, win a sectional, and a state championship.”

For the last two years, Kolten Bottom (Illinois College) and Blake Struble (SIU-Edwardsville) stood out in the pitching rotation in front of Jones.

“Since my freshman year we had tons of pitching,” Jones said. “For the most part, Kolten was always the ace or Blake. As the years have gone on, I’ve had to step more into the role of pitching against better teams. This year I’m going to have to do that, and I’m excited.”

Along with Bottom and Struble, the Hawks lose four other senior starters and will be forced to figure out early on what they’re made of. However, Jones and Walker are high on the freshman class of players.

“It’s going to be tougher since we don’t have those seniors back,” Walker said. “were most of our team, but we have some good freshman. We’re all pretty good friends and have good chemistry. We all played basketball and all seasoned. I think it might take a little more effort in teamwork, but I think we can be a 20-plus win team.”

Besides Jones, Walker, and other senior Curtis Lake, the Hawks also return key juniors that include Ethan Brannan, Garrett Settles, Clay Schnettgoecke, and Hunter Flowers, who missed last season due to shoulder surgery. Brady Cox is the lone sophomore on the team.

“We still have a lot of talent,” Jones said. “We have three seniors, a lot of juniors that are pretty talented and can definitely make an impact. We’ll be fine with pitching.”

“I’m ecstatic,” Walker said. “I’m really looking forward to getting out there and do what we do. I’m hoping we start off pretty strong.”