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3094 INDIAN CIRCLE
Marianna, FL 32446

May 13, 2020

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

By: Ellory Fuqua, Chipola Sports Information Intern



Clayte Rooks

FORMER CHIPOLA BASEBALL PLAYER ON FRONT LINES OF CORONA FIGHT

Baseball diamonds and operating rooms don't have much in common. Well, except the pressure: The pressure on a catcher trying to prevent the tying run at home plate; the pressure on a surgery resident to perform with precision to aid a struggling patient.

For Clayte Rooks, he knows both pressures well. As a first-year general surgery resident at the University of Mississippi Medical Center, Rooks never expected to be in a hospital during a global pandemic like COVID-19. But here he is, at age 26, challenged in ways he couldn't

have imagined before.

As a former baseball player at Chipola College in his hometown in Marianna, Fla., his time behind the plate didn't teach him how to fight a deadly virus. What it did teach him was hard-work, dedication, and how to best perform when it matters most.

"His aptitude was outstanding, his knowledge of the game and beyond was clear," Chipola Baseball Coach Jeff Johnson said.

At Chipola, Rooks served as the sole catcher for third-round Atlanta Braves draft pick Michael Mader. The duo played for their hometown team after graduating from Marianna High School in 2012.

These are the skills that later propelled him through undergrad at the University of Florida after his playing days were over. From there, Rooks went on to a grueling four years in medical school at Florida State, graduating in 2019. Now, in Jackson, Miss., the same traits remain.

"During residency I have worked harder than I ever have before," Rooks said.

The average day of a surgery resident like Rooks goes at a rapid-fire pace, filled with adrenaline moving from one operating room to another.

However, the first-year resident is in a peculiar situation. With many surgeries becoming non-essential due to the risk of COVID-19 exposure, his workload has become unpredictable.

“This month I was supposed to be on wound care,” said Rooks, 26. “But given the circumstances I have had to cover a lot of different things like transplants, surgical oncology, general surgery services and trauma.”

Those days in the hospital put Rooks in a more vulnerable position, along with the rest of his fellow surgery residents. As the only level-one trauma center in the state, the hospital receives the bulk of patients who are in need of acute care.

“Our hospital is seeing patients transferred in from smaller towns that do not have the proper equipment -- like ventilators -- or who are very sick,” he said.

This is where the danger of COVID-19 looms for Rooks.

“We have had patients who have come in with a gun-shot wound or car accident who have also tested positive for the virus,” he said.

The unknown can be considered just as frightening as the known.

“We have to wear a mask at all times and have to be cognisant of the fact that just because a patient doesn’t show signs of COVID-19, they could be asymptomatic,” he said.

Like a baseball game, no one can know an exact outcome before it happens. But being prepared and equipped with the right training and tools can help.

“I think there is an overlap in college sports and surgery specifically,” he said.

Rooks and several of his fellow residents have built a strong foundation through sports and they share that bond in their rotations.

“One of our fellow surgery residents, Wade Christopher who is a fifth-year surgical resident played football at Auburn and won a National Championship and another third-year resident, John Shaughnessy, played football at Northwestern State too,” he said.

Surrounded by fellow former student-athletes who played college football and baseball, the mindset remains the same.

“Surgery is a tough residency,” he said. “We get here early, we leave late and we work hard and have fun and learn to depend on each other.”

With shared experiences from the fields and in the operating room, there might be more in common than what meets the eye.

As the fight against the virus spans across the country and into his hospital, though, there is one stark difference.

This time, winning really is everything.

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