**FACING THE BEST**

**As Tech’s ace, Joe Mantiply is used to facing good competition, and he hopes to be doing so at the next level in the future**

By Marc Mullen

He is the self-proclaimed “clown” of the team, and ironically, as the team’s bus pulled into the Florida State University baseball complex area on March 30, it cruised by the tents of the FSU Flying High Circus set up just across the street past the right field wall.

Just the day before, it was revealed that junior left-handed pitcher Joe Mantiply had given himself the moniker as the team clown, much to the delight of a few teammates.

So it was no surprise that, when the bus made a right turn and passed between the two venues – baseball stadium on the left, circus tents on the right – the true clowns of the team, no doubt, yelled out, “Hey, Joe! Maybe that’s where you should be throwing tonight!”

Even though his performance that evening at Dick Howser Field was cut short by a 42-minute rain delay, Mantiply had given his team a chance – as he has all year – at pulling out a victory, this time against the fourth-ranked team in the nation.

“It’s fun going on the road and pitching at the Florida States, the Georgia Techs, the UNCs – that’s always great,” Mantiply said. “I love being in that kind of environment where people are trying to get into your head. That kind of fuels my fire.”

No clowning around here. On the contrary, the Danville, Va., native has been Tech’s No. 1 starting pitcher the past two seasons and generally tends to throw against the opponent’s top pitcher as well. He has faced first-round draft picks, like UVa’s Danny Hultzen (No. 2 overall pick last year) and FSU’s Sean Gilmartin (the No. 28 selection), and a potential first-rounder this year in Duke’s Marcus Stroman.

That matchup against Gilmartin, the Seminoles’ ace in 2011, turned out to be an epic pitcher’s duel, with Mantiply and the Hokies handing the FSU southpaw his only regular-season defeat of the season, a 2-1 Tech win at English Field.

“Yeah, I think about that [facing other team’s top pitchers] sometimes,” Mantiply said. “Those guys are first-rounders, and it’s kind of awesome to be in that company. I am the guy relied upon to go up against them. I try not to put them up too high on a pedestal, especially when I am pitching against them. But they’re definitely unbelievable pitchers, and it’s good to be in that company.”

He hopes to join both in their current neighborhood – in Major League organizations. Hultzen is in Seattle’s organization, while Gilmartin resides in Atlanta’s organization.

Mantiply could have followed that route coming out of high school. In a four-year career at Tunstall High School, he finished with an overall record of 33-2 with a 1.00 ERA and 358 strikeouts in 238 innings pitched. He was the player of the year in both the Piedmont District and Region IV in 2009.

The New York Mets selected Mantiply in the 48th round of the Major League Baseball First-Year Player Draft following his senior season at Tunstall – a bit of a surprise for Mantiply, who was sitting on the sand in Myrtle Beach, S.C.

“I really didn’t think that was even going to happen,” he said. “I had talked to a couple of teams throughout my senior season, but I didn’t plan on signing even if I got drafted. I mean, there was no way I was going to get drafted high enough, and I didn’t even think about it.

“I probably had talked to the Mets scout a week before the draft and then I didn’t talk to him at all until the third day. So we were watching it kind of there at the beach. We were just watching – we weren’t thinking I was going to get picked.

“So I was sitting on the beach, and it was midafternoon some time and my phone rang, and it was him – the guy – and he told me that they picked me. It was awesome. It was a great feeling.”

Odds are likely that Mantiply will get that call again this June – the 2012 First-Year Player Draft is June 4-6 – but he certainly doesn’t want to be at the beach this time. His ultimate goal, as is anybody’s that plays college baseball, is to get to Omaha, Neb., the site of the College World Series. Regionals will begin June 1 and Super Regionals will be June 8-11.

“I want to go to Omaha. I’ve always wanted to experience that. I just think that would be awesome,” he said.

The regional round of the NCAA Tournament marked Mantiply’s greatest moment as an athlete. He pitched in the South Carolina regional in 2010 against The Citadel in an elimination game for both squads. Then a freshman, he was called out of the bullpen in the fourth frame to maintain a three-run Hokie lead. The Bulldogs quickly made it 3-2 and had runners at the corners before Mantiply struck out William Ladd to end the threat.

He worked two more scoreless innings before being pulled in the seventh with a runner on second and two outs. The Hokies won the game 4-3, with Mantiply improving his record to 4-1 with the victory.

“I think, being in the postseason, it was kind of the same thing, but it wasn’t even close to being on the same level,” Mantiply said, recounting how he was used in a similar role as a freshman in high school. “But I was just as unprepared as a freshman in high school for that role as I was when I got here. I kind of got thrown into the fire in both places. But I just try to stay the same whether it’s a high-pressure situation or not. I just try to treat them the same.”

Mantiply’s first pressure-filled pitching situation came during his freshman season at Tunstall High. It actually came when he first pitched in a varsity game.

“I was in ninth grade, and in my first varsity scrimmage, I think I walked, like, eight people, and I didn’t pitch the whole season until like the last district game,” he said. “I pitched, and I won. And then I pitched the district championship, the regional championship and the state semifinals and won all three of them all in my freshman year.”

With him on most of these journeys from T-ball through his collegiate starts has been his father – David – whom Joe said comes to just about all of his games. His entire family tries to make as many as possible, but his dad is definitely whom Joe takes after – from his future career “After baseball, I’ve always wanted to be a pharmaceutical rep. It’s what my dad does,” to his fetish for hats.

Well, sort of.

“My dad loves his hats. He’s always had that cowboy boots and cowboy hat type of look,” Joe said. “I have cowboy boots, but I’m not a big cowboy boots or cowboy hat guy. That’s just his style.”

“I’m a big-time baseball hat guy,” he added, while wearing the newest Miami Marlin hat. “I’m trying to get all of the hats from every major league team. I’ve got about 10 or 12 right now.”

As of now, he needs to purchase any hat he wants for his collection. But who knows, maybe in the short future, he’ll only be looking to wear just one.

(MAYBE PUT THE FOLLOWING IN A BOX WITHIN OR TOWARD THE END OF THE STORY)

**THE BOOK ON JOE MANTIPLY**

**On his motivation to pitch –** “My junior varsity coach actually told me that I would probably never be a pitcher past high school. He would always tell me that I was going to be a better position player than a pitcher and that I would need to be a position player if I had any chance of playing at the next level. So I don’t know. Maybe that kind of sparked me to be a better pitcher.”

**On his commitment to Tech –** “When the whole recruiting process came around, my dad went through it when he was in high school with basketball [David Mantiply played at Elon], so that was a big help from him. The main thing was that, whenever I found a school that I wanted to go to, that was the one we were going to stick with.”

**On his biggest fans –** “Probably my biggest fans are my grandparents, my mom’s mom and dad. They come to as many games as they can, and my grandma actually keeps the book for every one of my games ever since I was a freshman in high school. So she’ll call me every night after a game and give me stats and tell me my whole stat line. She keeps me up to date on all of that.”

**On his status update –** “I do have a girlfriend - Taylor Hite – and we met in high school. I’ve been dating her since sophomore year, and now, she attends Jefferson College of Health Sciences in Roanoke and is studying occupational therapy. She comes to mostly all of my games, so I see her pretty often.”

**On his summer occupation –** “I worked in a tobacco field. My best friend at home – Ethan Fowlkes – his dad, Frank, is a tobacco farmer in North Carolina [Yanceyville]. So whenever they need help, and I’m home in the summer, I help them out. I just do little things, like topping plants or weed eating around his barns. I don’t pull any, but I’ve moved irrigation pipes, just whatever his dad needs us to do.”