

LSU baseball player Derek Helenihi reclaims the third base spot and helped lead Tigers to College World Series

June 9, 2009 - BATON ROUGE -- LSU's lineup has undergone a great deal of shuffling this season from the pitching staff to the batting order.



Helenihi has reclaimed his third base starting spot and helped the Tigers advance to the College World Series.

Third baseman Derek Helenihi was the first to get shuffled to the bench.

Inconsistent at the plate, the player who started 58 games last year -- mostly as an outfielder -- was nudged out by freshman Tyler Hanover at the hot corner. And the way Hanover was playing, it looked as if Helenihi had better get used to his new environs.

But with Hanover in a mild slump at the plate and in the field, Helenihi won his job back, at least for the time being. LSU Coach Paul Mainieri said Helenihi's recent performance and experience will earn him a start when the Tigers play Virginia on Saturday at 6 p.m. in the College World Series

Helenihi first showed signs of a comeback when he hit a pinch-hit three-run homer against Alabama in the SEC Tournament, what turned out to be the winning margin in a 9-6 victory.

Again in a pinch role, he rapped a two-run double to keep a big inning going against Southern in the Baton Rouge Regional, and had two hits and two RBIs in a starting role against Minnesota.

With a trip to Omaha on the line Sunday, he celebrated his fourth start since April with a solo homer and run scoring single in a 5-3 victory against Rice.

"I feel like I'm hitting the ball great," said Helenihi, a senior from Livermore, Calif. "I'm seeing the ball well. It's coming in looking like a softball. I feel right in the groove."

In his late season surge, Helenihi is 11-for-21 with two homers and nine RBIs, and has raised his average 59 points to .313.

It would have been easy for Helenihi to feel entitlement as a senior and to subsequently pout at being ousted by a freshman. Mainieri paid careful attention to his reaction.

"I watched his attitude in the dugout, and it's always been upbeat," he said. "I told him all you have to do is look at (ace) Louis Coleman for an example of a kid who was down as down could be. But (Helenihi) never lost belief in himself and never turned towards a bad attitude, and look how his career was resurrected and the great things he's had. If you keep a good attitude, good things can happen."

Helenihi started 41 games in right field and 10 at third, where he was the heir apparent to Michael Hollander. But this season when he got off to a slow start, Mainieri began to look at other options. Hanover stepped in and made an impact, hitting well above .300.

Helenihi said his first reaction was disappointment and disagreement, but as a senior he also knew a poor attitude could only damage things. So he joined the bench crew and saw baseball from a different perspective.

"As a player you're never going to agree with it right away," Helenihi said. "He put Tyler and Mikie (Mahtook) in, and as soon as they start playing you get over it real quick. They were both playing great.

"It's hard; you want to be out there. But you get in here with other guys and their attitudes are so good, it rubs off. You don't want to be the one guy with a negative attitude sitting in a corner. It's actually a pretty good time in there."

Helenihi didn't just maintain a good attitude. He watched and learned while also staying sharp. He continued to work hard; Mainieri said, kept his batting eye and has delivered in some clutch situations.

Case in point was the Rice game. On a night when LSU was having trouble coming up with the big hit, Helenihi battled Rice starter Ryan Berry and singled up the middle. Later in the game with LSU up 4-2, he gave the Tigers an insurance run by fighting an outside pitch and homering to right.

"It was good getting in there and getting a chance to swing," he said. "Now that Coach has given me the opportunity, I feel like I've been playing the whole time, like I haven't missed a beat."

Written by [Jim Kleinpeter](#), [The Times-Picayune](#) June 09, 2009