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Acalanes Baseball's Video-Analysis System a Home Run

By Spencer Silva



Photo Gint Federas

After several years of offensive output seemingly incommensurate with their talent, Acalanes Dons' head coach Justin Santich-Hughes, and others, decided to look for answers.

"We always thought our offense could be better, so we wanted to invest in some tools," he explained.

Two years ago, they found a tool in RightViewPro, a video-tracking system developed by former major leaguer Don Slaught.

With the help of the Lafayette A's - a local non-profit that helps fundraise for local baseball projects - and Acalanes parents, the program was able to raise enough money to purchase cameras, a radar gun and the accompanying computer software.

At the professional and collegiate ranks, teams have long used advances in technology and data gathering to effect change in box scores. Now, it seems, the "Moneyball" ethos made famous by the Oakland Athletics is trickling all the way down to high school.

The Acalanes baseball field now features three cameras that record every single play from both first and third base sides, as well as from behind home plate. Last year, during the system's inaugural season, video from games was primarily used to aid hitting coach Clint Hoover, who played for both Cal and the Houston Astros, in tweaking players' swings.

The system also allows coaches to juxtapose players' swings with those of current major leaguers. If players use a leg kick, for instance, they can compare themselves to Blue Jays' third baseman Josh Donaldson; or, if a player has a minimal stride, they may decide Angels' first baseman Albert Pujols is a better model.

"Every single major leaguer has the same things in their swing. Why wouldn't we try to get our guys there if we can?" Santich-Hughes asked.

The results thus far have been eye opening. Despite graduating many of their key players, the Dons raised their team batting average some 45 points and won the DFAL crown in 2015. Santich-Hughes estimates the team average is up another 40-or-so points this season.

"We just started using the system to its full capabilities," Santich-Hughes said.

In order to track more data - to develop scouting reports on opposing pitchers and hitters, position defensive shifts, and even learn coach and umpire tendencies - the team hired two Acalanes students, senior Matt Self and sophomore Tyler Sverak to log play-by-play data into the system's proprietary software. The RightView Pro also came with a Stalker II radar gun - the preferred model of major league scouts - to track pitch velocity.

Self became interested in sports analytics after using the Hudl - video analysis software for football

- during his tenure on the school's football team. He has a background in technology and is considering pursuing the intersection between sports and technology as a career.

"The pitchers always want to see the radar-gun readings," Self said.

Santich-Hughes believes that his career, which ended after four years at San Jose State as a catcher, could have been different with the type of technology his kids have.

"I had really good coaching and I was never taught this stuff. I'm convinced I'd be playing in the major leagues if I could hit! Maybe that's a stretch, but that's the kind of impact this stuff has," he declared.

Another benefit to the technology is it allows the team to send colleges accurate data on potential recruits, a luxury most high schools don't have.

Last week the Dons (9-1 overall, 2-0 DFAL) started DFAL play with comfortable victories over both Dougherty Valley and Campolindo. They're averaging a robust 6.6 runs-scored per game and appear to be the team to beat in the DFAL.

Santich-Hughes admits he's been fielding more questions about the system recently.



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[back](#)

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