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## Gael's Baseball Earns First Trip to NCAA Tournament

By Karl Buscheck



Corbin Burnes Photos Tod Fierner

The Saint Mary's baseball team hammered Gonzaga 13-4 on May 28 at Banner Island Ballpark in Stockton to claim its first ever West Coast Conference Tournament championship and clinch its first ever trip to the NCAA playoffs.

"It's a lot of fun," said Eric Valenzuela - the WCC Coach of the Year - whose Gaels own a 33-23 record overall and an 18-9 mark in conference play." These guys are deserving of everything they're given. They work hard and have put us in a position where we're fighting to get to (the CollegeWorld Series in) Omaha."

In the title game - as the Gaels beat the No. 3 seed Gonzaga for a second day in a row - first baseman Jackson Thoreson collected a three-run homer in the second inning. Second baseman Zack Kirtley went 4-for-5 and drove in a pair of runs on his way to being named the tournament MVP.

In the opener on May 26, the Gaels topped the No. 4 seed Pepperdine 8-7 thanks to an 11th-inning walk-off single to left field by Kirtley.

"He's one of the best second basemen in the country," Valenzuela said of the sophomore. "He's going to go play in the Cape Cod League this summer and they've also called me from Team USA asking about him. So, he's as high profile of a guy around as there is."

Kirtley only had the chance to strike the decisive hit because of the power of junior Nate Nolan. The catcher connected on a pair of game-tying home runs - first in the eighth and then in the 10th.

A day later, the Gaels clubbed Gonzaga 13-4. Third baseman Anthony Villa gave Saint Mary's an immediate advantage, connecting on a 2-run shot in the top of the first. In the sixth, designated hitter Ian McLoughlin hit a grand slam as part of a six-run frame for the Gaels.

Even before arriving at the conference championship, the Gaels, who led the WCC with nine players on the All-Academic team, had enjoyed a record breaking season.

"It's history," Valenzuela said after his squad earned a share of the WCC regular season title. "There's lot of tradition [here] with lots of major leaguers and there was a Hall of Famer in there. The tradition of Saint Mary's Baseball goes way back. I mean, 100 years. So, the tradition of it is great. To be the first team to win a conference championship is unbelievable. And to be part of that with this group is special."

The title capped a dramatic rise for the program during Valenzuela's first three years in charge in Moraga. In 2015, the Gaels pushed beyond the .500 mark and this season the team surpassed the 30-win plateau for the first time in 25 years.

"I don't think our guys are just happy to be here. I think our guys want more," Valenzuela said. "I

think that's what's expected with our program and within our program is that we work hard and we want to keep on climbing."

No player better embodies the upward trajectory of the program than junior ace Corbin Burnes.

"Being our Friday guy and pitching against some of the Friday guys in this conference, who are some of the best pitchers in the country, he's been phenomenal," Valenzuela said.

While the postseason beckons first, Burnes figures to be one of the most highly sought-after starting pitchers when the MLB draft rolls around on June 9.

"He's a great leader. His stuff is electric," Valenzuela said. "He's going to be a high draft pick - possible first rounder. First or second rounder - for sure. He's a major leaguer."



Nate Nolan

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