

Published March 21st, 2018

Promising early returns for Lamorinda baseball

By Jon Kingdon

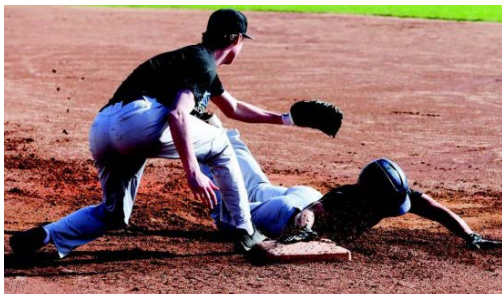


Photo Gint Federas

A couple of weeks prior to major league baseball's call for pitchers and catchers to show up at training camp, the Lamorinda baseball teams have been practicing in anticipation of the 2018 season. Early returns are promising with Acalanes, Campolindo and Miramonte having a combined record of 15-2.

After a 27-1 season in 2017, losing in the championship game, Miramonte head coach Kevin Hodges has made it a point to have his team not look back and to put the success and final disappointment of last season behind them. "We have set new goals this season," he said. "We are not trying to go undefeated and are looking for top competition early in the season. We need this team to establish their own identity. We respect what we did last year but we are moving on from there with a tougher early schedule." Still Hodges can't be disappointed as the Matadors have won their first five games.

With 15 seniors, seven juniors and only one sophomore, this is a very mature team. Says Hodges: "The team has good chemistry on and off the field. They not only enjoy playing but the workouts outside of practice as well. They have high goals and they want to win a championship."

When asked the strength of his team, Hodges mentions the team's pitching, hitting, speed and defense, which pretty much covers it, though he is still trying to establish the depth at each position.

Senior Bill Duby is the ace on the pitching staff. Sam Liang, bound for San Jose State next year, is the second starter and also plays the infield. Hodges is still looking for someone to step up and become the third starter.

Liang holds the defense together in the infield and seniors Jake Hassard and Will Cassriel are the leaders in the outfield.

Hodges is excited about the potential of the one sophomore on the team, outfield Declan Curran. Says Hodges: "Declan played on JV last year and I have seen him play in over 70 games. He can play and hit varsity pitching and is making his way into the rotation in the outfield."

Coming off a 14-13 season in 2017, Campolindo has begun this year 4-1. Campolindo head coach Max Luckhurst attributes the change very simply: "Last year's team did not have much experience, playing with only two players with varsity experience and we have been able to move forward from that point. They understand that they can compete at this level. Now they understand our format and what is going on. We have a lot of players that are fighting for playing time."

With 15 seniors and juniors and four sophomores, this is a mature team that last season made it to the third round of the playoffs. Luckhurst likes the maturity of his team and its perseverance: "This team knows how to compete. After falling behind, we have kept our cool and won the types of games that we were losing last season."

Luckhurst appreciates that his team is not sitting on their laurels after their early season success: "This team is always looking to get better every day. Ideally our last game will be our best game."

The team's pitching staff is led by junior Michael Crews and senior Will Bishop, a four-year player.

Backing up the pitchers is a defense that Luckhurst sees as a strength: "Our defense is playing well. We have a lot of returners and the new guys are picking it up. They pay attention to detail and are working every day to get better." With the conclusion of Campolindo's basketball season, Trevin Kroichick and the ever-present John Torchio will be joining the team.

Luckhurst does not see the need to name captains for the team: "This is a mature team. No one is above anyone else. Our seniors will lead by example. They all can take care of their responsibilities."

Acalanes has started off quickly having won five of their first six games after going 12-13 last season. Head coach Justin Hughes is excited about his team: "They are an extremely competitive and resilient group. It is a talented team with very good chemistry. It's a good group of guys."

The Dons roster has both experience and youth with 16 seniors and juniors and seven sophomores and freshmen.

According to Hughes: "This is a well-rounded team. We have a good defense but our offense is what will separate us. All of our players can hit and a number of them are dominating. We don't strike out and we can hit for power. We also have excellent team speed. This puts a lot of pressure on the defense with a lot of base stealing."

The youth of the team can still be an issue but Hughes welcomes their enthusiasm: "They all love to play and are competitive but there will be mental lapses with young players though they don't get down. After losing to Elk Grove, the team responded by defeating Clovis West 4-3 after falling behind 3-0."

The pitching staff is led by senior lefthander Brian Merken, who has an effective fastball, curveball and slider. The next two starters are senior Josh Cerejo and sophomore Nick Kresnak. Freshman Michael Castelli has proven to be an effective closer with three saves so far. Says Hughes: "Michael is very poised. In his first game, he came in with bases loaded and one out and got out of it."

Freshman shortstop Davis Diaz and Kresnak are the key players in the infield. Hughes likes how well the team works together: "It's a weird dynamic. They lead as a group. We have a lot of young players but it just all goes together." The Dons also welcome the return of Gavin Shipp who just concluded his basketball season.

Hughes is looking forward to the upcoming stretch of games: "We are playing a number of Division 1 schools and we have the talent to compete. We are going to see where we are with our nonleague games."

Reach the reporter at: sportsdesk@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA