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Early success and potential shown by Lamorinda baseball teams

By Jon Kingdon



Campolindo pitcher Joey Cecchin Photo Jon Kingdon

Acalanes

After finishing last season ranked 241st in the state, head coach Connor Hornsby has led Acalanes to a major turnaround this season, starting the year with nine straight wins, a ranking of 14th in the state and third by the Bay Area News group.

"We've had a number of come-from-behind wins and there is no give-in with our team," Hornsby said. "All of our guys understand their roles and we really focus on the little things that allows us to win. We're a lot more selfless and not focusing too much on some of the individual numbers."

As a team, the Dons are batting .313 led by co-captain Sully Bailey (.393), Keegan Goddard (.310), Isaac Copen (.333), Benji O'Rourke (.433), and James Stadt (.385). "Bailey is a big reason for our success," Hornsby said. "Goddard's a top leadoff man, Benji is a first-time catcher [but] has been one of our clutch guys, and Copen is a big body guy with a bright future. We were really young last year, and a number of our starters didn't have huge roles then."

Hornsby, who played for St. Mary's, has taken on the Gaels basketball attitude of gritty not pretty. "We've successfully used the two-strike suicide squeeze and beaten out throws to extend innings with the old school style of grittiness, multiple mentalities with some new age thinking and are our guys are buying into it," Hornsby said.

The pitching staff is led by co-captain Henry Souza and Peter Thorn, along with Branson Smith, Jake Colaco, and Hank Bauer, among others. "Henry has been our number one guy for years," Hornsby said. "He's more of a pitcher than a thrower. Peter is my go-to guy when things get hairy. He can give me five innings or come in and give me two outs. Bauer is a submarine pitcher that has been very effective in relief."

The infield is solid with co-captain Gavin Bender at third, Stadt at short, and Mason Zirkel at second. "Mason is also a co-captain who understands positioning and is just a vacuum out there." Hornsby said.

The outfield is set with Goddard, Everett Glass, and David Gonzalez. "All of them work hard and nothing gets down out there," Hornsby said. Goddard and Glass are probably the two best outfielders in the area."

Hornsby is also utilizing Paul Kuhner, a sprinter with the track team. "Speed puts pressure on the other team," Hornsby said. "Paul runs like a deer and he's our go to guy when we have some big guys on base that can't run that well."

Hornsby accepts the team's high rankings but knows that it comes with a proviso: "With our record, we have a target on our back but we're ready for that. The rankings are nice but I don't want our players to be satisfied with this. I want them to keep putting the pedal to the medal, practicing and playing hard."

Campolindo

Despite losing nine players to graduation, Campolindo, with a roster of three seniors, eleven juniors, and six sophomores, has started this season off well with a 5-2 record.

"We're definitely a brand-new team that is young but is gaining experience," Head Coach Julian Fiammengo said. "A lot of our guys are playing varsity baseball for the first time and I'm proud of how they're competing."

Though it is early in the season, Campolindo has raised their team batting average of .246 last season to .303 led by Cameron Imberg (.450), Jack Luster (.435), William Myers (.412), Andy Moon (.385), and Miles Clayton (.346). "We really don't worry much about batting averages," Fiammengo said. "We talk about the process and having quality at bats, hitting the ball hard and putting pressure on the defense. If we can continue to do that, the results will take care of themselves."

With a staff of eight to ten pitchers, Fiammengo has a lot of options on who to pitch. The staff is led by senior Joey Cecchin ,who came over from the water polo team, William Myers, and Colin Rutzen. There are three left handers on the staff, Dom Caruso, Justin Nagayama, and Alex Rothey, and infielders Moon and Johnny Wang can also be called upon.

"We're still figuring out each pitchers' roles in terms of being a starter, middle reliever, or closer. Joey is very competitive and fits well as a starter or a closer," Fiammengo said, "Myers just needs to get ahead earlier in the count. We're looking at a three-man rotation and we'll use who has the hot hand. Four to six of our pitchers are going to get a lot of innings. We're getting our share of strike outs and that's definitely a good thing."

Replacing Hideki Prather (now at Clemson) at catcher, Imberg has not missed a beat. "Cameron put in a ton of work in the offseason to get better behind the dish and he has been doing a good job for us, receiving the ball really well," Fiammengo said.

The defense has been solid, led by shortstop Miles Clayton, second baseman Johnny Wang, and outfielders Blake Robison and Luke McLeod. "Still, we have a lot of work to do," Fiammengo said.

With Moon, Imberg, and Clayton taking on the role of team leaders, sophomores Luke McLeod and Cole Fisher have also been filling that role. "Even though they're sophomores, Luke and Cole have been learning how to lead and that's what I've been preaching to them, that if everybody becomes a leader, that's when the team can be really good."

Miramonte

After eight years as a varsity assistant coach, Skip Tague was named Miramonte's head coach and, as often happens early in the season, the weather played a big part in the team's preparation for the season.

"At times we did not have a field to practice on, though we did have some good back up plans and it's starting to come together," Tague said. "Our biggest strength is that we have a lot of guys that can play multiple positions. We have fourteen players that can pitch which gives us a lot of versatility on the mound. Our ability to defend and manufacture runs is going to be the key to our success."

Jordan Rodino is the team's most versatile player, being able to play four different positions, and nine players have two positions. "When we practice, we try to get them reps at all those spots because we want to keep that versatility and flexibility and see what's happening in the game," Tague said. "We're relatively inexperienced but the work ethic and maturity level of our players is high. The guys that didn't play much last year are competitors and will get a lot of opportunities this

season. They're mature players and I think that they'll excel given the opportunity."

Tague is aggressive in his offensive philosophy. "Our team's strengths are speed and intelligence," Tague said. "We are aggressive on the bases and we're going to try to mix it up a little bit and that's going to be a key to our team's success. We practice that stuff a lot and we'll continue to work on it."

The leading pitchers are J.D. Pearce and Brody Bornstein, though Pearce is injured but should be back soon, with Jordan Rodino and Casey Yung set to fill in. "With a number of games coming up, we'll be going with a three-man rotation, and we have the depth to have a fourth starter, if necessary," Tague said. "With so many available pitchers, I'm a little more cautious with innings and pitch counts, particularly early in the season. I'd rather take them out a little too soon and a little too late."

Joe Shallot and Kobe Wong have been leading the offense and should be helped when Pearce returns as a three or four hitter. "As a team, we're a little behind, but we're getting better each game" Tague said. "Joe was [a] great hitter last year and we expect all good things from him this year. Wong has a lot of pop and a great swing. We're not even close to our offensive potential."

Luke Holden is set as the team's third baseman and there are seven players that can play up the middle. Tague is particularly taken with the one sophomore on the team, Ian Hughes: "Ian's defense is outstanding and he's a real gamer in all aspects. His baseball IQ is very high, and he plays more like a veteran."

There is also a lot of depth in the outfield with Finn McManus in right, Kobe Wong in left, and Gavin Kelleher in center. "We have good speed at all three outfield positions and that's a big asset for us," Tague said.

As the team is coming together, Tague sees strength in the leadership on the team: "We've got great returning senior leaders. I'm also very impressed with the leadership and maturity shown by the underclassmen and they're all good team guys."

Reach the reporter at: sportsdesk@lamorindaweekly.com

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