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LAMORINDA SPORTS

Baseball teams pointing to the playoffs



Photo Jon Kingdon

Acalanes' Luke Souza bunting; Connor McPhail on deck; Miramonte Catcher Anthony Ricevuto

By Jon Kingdon

Acalanes head coach Connor Hornsby's plan was to begin the year with a challenging non-league schedule. After losing four of their first six games, the Dons won 10 of their next 12 games, moving up to 11th in the Bay Area rankings. "Our plan was to play those type of teams to see how they perform and how they do the right things on the field," Hornsby said. "Those are the kind of things that we have embraced along with making adjustments every day and getting the right players in at the right time."

This looks like a veteran team, comprised of 12 seniors, nine juniors and three sophomores. Like everyone else, the coronavirus deprived the players of a complete season the last two years. "The players are learning a lot and leaning on each other," Hornsby said, "It's good to have the senior leadership, helping the younger kids who are getting to play."

Hornsby is trying to turn the clock back to the days when he was playing for Acalanes. "I want us to be a blue-collar program," Hornsby said. "Blue collar is showing up with your lunch pails every day, doing the little things right, catching right, doing ground balls right, listening to your coaches and even picking up the baseballs at the end of practice. Talent does not always succeed and that's when hard work comes into play."

The Dons have five players batting over .300 - Will Berrien (.350), Nico O'Rourke (.333), Kyle White (.300), Miles Bergman (.3108). Connor McPhail is batting .286 but has a .525 on base percentage.

Hornsby has taken the Oakland A's Moneyball philosophy: "We stress the quality of our at bats and how to get on base with hits, walks, and hit by pitches, trying to figure it out one base at a time. Once on base, we'll bunt, hit and run, bunt, and run, put guys in motion and putting the balls on the ground and that's how we've been winning our

games."

Leading the pitching staff has been senior Benjy Braunstein. After that, it's been a group effort with seniors Ethan Montgomery and Ethan Rowland, juniors Tyson Bates and Miller Smith and sophomore Henry Souza. "We're leaning on Benjy who fills up the zone and is not scared of any situation," Hornsby said. "We're just looking for our pitchers to get three outs at a time. If we think it's necessary to take them out at that point, they will embrace it. We play pitch to contact focusing on getting ahead on the count. It's a game of chess with us: sometimes it's a good move and sometimes it's not."

True to his maxim, Hornsby used three pitchers, Souza, Bates, and Smith, to throw a combined five inning no-hitter versus St. Mary's.

After averaging 3-4 errors a game early in the season, the team has shown a marked improvement. "Sophomore Gavin Bender has been figuring things out at third and Montgomery and Miles Bergman have been solid at short and second," Hornsby said "Montgomery is our most athletic guy on the field and he and Bergman have done a really good job in turning double plays. Will Berrien is one of the better centerfielders in the area. We have our pitchers throwing up in the zone to make them hit fly balls and that's an adjustment we made from early in the season."

With their eyes focused on the post-season NCS tournament, it's a simple formula for continued success for Hornsby. "For us, it's energy, attitude, and effort. We will find a way to put it together and everyone has to be ready to come in at any point."

Miramonte
For first-year head coach Sean Hennessey, a difficult non-league schedule was not a problem, going 9-3 with wins against Division 1 opponents like St. Patrick's and Amador Valley. League play was another story having lost their first five league games, three of them by a total of four runs. The Matadors finally broke

into the win column with a 7-6 victory over Acalanes, breaking the Dons' four-game win streak.

This is a team with 17 seniors, seven juniors and one sophomore. "We're a really mature team and they have responded well to me as a first-year coach," Hennessey said. "They've learned what I was about and I'm still learning about them. I love the character of the players. They're a great bunch of kids and we'll continue to get better as the season wears on."

Such a mature team has matched up well with Hennessey's way of working with them. "I believe in the players having a say in the program," Hennessey said. "I hold myself to high standards and those are the same character traits that I want to bring to my players. I like to have conversations and the players appreciate that they have a say but, ultimately, I make the final decisions."

The leading hitters have been seniors Payton Harris, Jack Brun, and Anthony Ricevuto. "My hitting philosophy is hitting it from gap to gap, seeing what we can do to extend innings and put a lot of pressure on our opponents," Hennessey said. "The fluctuation of their batting averages is just one data point. If they're making productive outs such as advancing the man, hitting sacrifice flies, or doing whatever we can to score runs, I'm okay with that. We walk a lot so if we can get six or seven hits a game, we'll be in the game."

There is a lot of pitching depth on the roster led by seniors Will Heckler, Johnny Schlemmer, Nolan O'Brien, J.J. Savala, junior Michael Bohm and sophomore J.D. Pierce. "Heckler had a slow start that was hard on him," Hennessey said. "We've changed some things mechanically, and he had a two inning save against Amador Valley where he gave up no hits. Michael has been excellent. J.D., our only sophomore, started against Amador Valley and pitched well."

Jack Brun at shortstop and Armaan Sharma at second have been solid up the middle. "Our infield has played very well, and they have kept us in games," Hennessey said. "We've been playing well in

the outfield, making the plays that we should."

Leadership from the players has been a key to the team's performance: "I was very fortunate in coming into this program with some kids who are natural leaders. Ricevuto, being a catcher, sees everything and Harris and Brun have done everything I've asked along with the other seniors. These guys want to have success. The last few years have been tough without having much to play for other than the enjoyment of the game so it's nice to have goals again and we know that we can compete with everybody."

Campolindo

Even with a roster of nine seniors and eight juniors, and an 8-8 record, Campolindo head coach Max Luckhurst has a team that had to establish who they were from the start. "We have had to try and find our new identity," Luckhurst said. "There are a lot of players on the roster that are playing that have not had a lot of experience. It takes a little while to get up and running. I

don't think we ever walk out day one with an identity."

The pitching staff has been consistent all season, led by seniors Colin Godfrey and Matt Elliot who have been the primary starters. Juniors Philip Jagard and Adrian Blumberg have been anchoring the bullpen.

There has been a solid core of hitters led by juniors Hideki Prather, who has already committed to the University of Michigan and Greg Palamountain along with seniors Matt Elliot and Connor Fritch who have also been hitting for average. "We swing it fairly well through the lineup from one through nine," Luckhurst said. "We also have some team speed and everybody's able to compete."

The defense has also been a strength of the team. "Our infield, outfield and catching has been solid," Luckhurst said. "We ask our pitchers to pitch to contact so these guys better be ready to play catch and get outs."

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