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St. Mary's Baseball Finding Early-Season Rhythm

By Dean Boerner



Corbin Burnes Photo Tod Fierner

Despite graduating star slugger Collin Ferguson, St. Mary's baseball returns most of the talented nucleus that led the Gaels to their first winning season in six years. Last season, the Gaels finished 28-27 - a substantial improvement on the 16-39 record of the season before - and now, at 15-10, many in the program are excited about the upward, winning trend.

"Last year was a big year for us," said junior catcher Nate Nolan. "We had a lot of guys from that team return this year, so having that taste of success was good and showed a lot of guys what we were capable of."

Head coach Eric Valenzuela is confident that his team will build off of its improvement from a year ago. "I like that attitude of our guys," said Valenzuela. "As long as we have energy and enthusiasm, we're going to be okay."

Early on, the Gaels don't appear to have any glaring weakness. The Gaels' Friday starter, junior Corbin Burnes - a West Coast Conference Preseason Pitcher of the Year selection - leads the pitching staff. Burnes followed a solid sophomore campaign with a dominant summer in the Cape Cod League. The tall right-handed hurler touches 94 mph with his fastball, and is expected to go in the first few rounds of the Major League Baseball Draft this June.

The team's Saturday and Sunday starters are also juniors: Johnny York and Cameron Neff. York won seven games last season, a team high, while Neff posted a 2.23 ERA in five starts.

Another area of improvement is the bullpen, a major liability in previous seasons. This spring, the Gaels' relief corps is a mix of both experience and youth. Nathan Simmons and David Dellaserra are the staff's elder statesmen - it's only seniors - while newcomers Bryce Reichmann, a junior transfer, and

freshmen Ty Madrigal and Jonathan Buckley round out the pen.

"Our greatest strength, as opposed to other years, is that this year we have a lot more depth in the bullpen and offensively," Burnes said.

Valenzuela points to his pitching staff's command as a crucial factor in their success. "We have to

throw strikes," he explained. "We give up some hits, but it's better than walking guys and giving up free bases."

On offense, the Gaels return several key contributors. Sophomore Zach Kirtley, Nolan, and seniors Anthony Villa and Anthony Gonsolin, headline a balanced lineup. Kirtley - who batted .346 as a freshman and earned Louisville Slugger Freshman All-American honors - is locked in as the team's leadoff hitter, Nolan and Villa anchor the middle of the lineup with their right-handed power bats, while Gonsolin provides both extra-base power and base-stealing acumen.

Just over a month into the season, Saint Mary's holds a 6-3 record in conference. Nolan has already launched five homeruns - including a walk-off blast against rival Gonzaga on March 25. Kirtley is once again hitting for a superbly high average, but he's also added a power element to his game, matching Nolan's homerun total of five. Eddie Haus, a redshirt freshman, has also hit well. He burst onto the scene this summer after winning the Hampton's League MVP.

"It seems like we have new guys who step up every day," Nolan expressed.

Even with the early success, Valenzuela stresses improvement. "Executing from an offensive standpoint is something we have to keep improving on," Valenzuela said.

On the mound, Corbin Burnes has met, and maybe even surpassed, expectations. Burnes has four wins and ERA below 2.00. Johnny York has also pitched well, and the Gaels bullpen continues to be productive, especially southpaw Bryce Reichmann.

The Gaels seem to have the pieces to compete for a WCC championship for the first time in years. "I think we have a very special team this year," Burnes said. "By sticking to the process, I think this team can do something that no other Saint Mary's baseball team has done before."

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