

LAMORINDA SPORTS

New Coach, New Direction

By Scott Wu



Sophomore Anthony Gonsolin singled and pitched in the loss to Pepperdine on Sunday.

Photos Tod Fierner



Ryan Brockett is focused on team success.



Cameron Neff

With a new head coach and a strong regular season start, the Saint Mary's Gaels' (5-4 WCC, 13-17 overall) baseball program is up-and-coming. New head coach Eric Valenzuela brings experience and expertise to the Gaels' coaching staff.

A former pitching coach and recruiting coordinator at San Diego State, Valenzuela has shown his ability to attract talented prospects. In 2010 and 2011, his San Diego State recruiting classes were ranked in the top 25 by Baseball America. In 2013, Valenzuela's pitching staff led the Mountain West Conference in the majority of statistical categories and helped the team win its first conference title since 2000.

Valenzuela preaches a message of hard work and focus. "I teach my players three aspects of the game: throw strikes, execute offensively, and play great defense," Valenzuela explained. "My guys don't make ex-

cuses. We look in the mirror instead of pointing fingers," he stated.

Valenzuela believes that his team is capable of playing at a very competitive level in the WCC. Currently in fourth place with a league record of 5-4, the Gaels have shown that they can do just that.

The team has faced challenges, though. Last weekend, the Gaels struggled offensively and were swept by the WCC-leading Pepperdine Waves. Nonetheless, Saint Mary's has been able to compete with nationally ranked teams, beating No. 9 Cal State Fullerton on March 15.

With the second half of the season approaching, the Gaels will look to continue their conference success and make a run in the WCC Conference Tournament.

Valenzuela is optimistic about the direction of the team. "I think that we'll not only be a highly competi-

tive program in our conference, but also nationwide," Valenzuela said.

Senior pitcher Ryan Brockett (4-3) attributes much of the team's accomplishments to the new system under Valenzuela. "It's a new program with a work ethic that is improved and a selfless attitude," Brockett said.

Brockett, who is 8-8 in league play thus far in his career, acknowledged that Valenzuela works with players to develop their skills. "His ability to develop talent gives the team a new perspective," he explained.

Echoing the "team first" philosophy, Brockett is focused on the WCC championships and team success. "I want to pitch in and win a conference tournament," he explained. "I want to keep progressing in my college career and give my team the chance to win that they deserve," he said.

Valenzuela has made an impression on his freshman recruits as well. "Coach Valenzuela preaches hard work and deserving the right to win," said freshman pitcher Cameron Neff (5-3). "We have a great chance to be the most competitive team in our conference if we keep working hard," he said.

A pitcher with a dominant fastball, Neff was named WCC Pitcher of the Week in mid-March. He chose to commit to the Saint Mary's baseball program because he believed the team would offer him a smooth transition to the next level of competition. "At first I was nervous, but as I gained more experience and maturity I began to pitch better," he said of his transition to the collegiate level.



Trevor Ellison looks to beat the throw.



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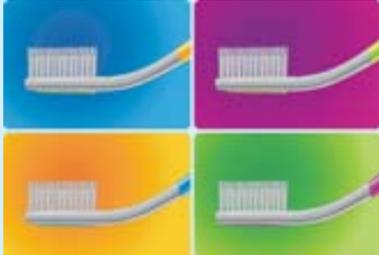
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