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Young Saint Mary's Baseball Team is On The Rise

By Karl Buscheck



SMC freshman Zach Kirtley dives back to first. Photos Gint Federas

league type of talent like Corbin Burnes, yeah, that makes an immediate statement."

The sophomore starter, who throws a wipeout slider and can hit 95 mph with his fastball, has really taken off in his second season. "I went into the summer and figured some things out mechanically and kind of turned it around," said Burnes. "Got stronger, started throwing harder and the numbers are starting to show this year."

The numbers have definitely been impressive for the righty. Burnes owns a 6-4 record and a 3.00 ERA, while pitching a team-high 78 innings and leading the Gaels with 82 strikeouts.

After Saint Mary's cruised past Santa Clara 6-1 on May 1 thanks to a 14-hit barrage and an 8.1-inning outing from sophomore and former Acalanes standout Johnny York, Burnes took the mound for the Gaels on May 2. The starter piled up 10 punchouts, but he also dished out five walks and allowed five runs. Ultimately, a three-run rally from the Broncos in the ninth sent the hosts to a 8-7 defeat. It was the same story in game three, as Santa Clara once again notched three runs in the final frame to edge past Saint Mary's 8-6.

Losing two games by a combined three runs to the conference foe was not the result that the Gaels were hoping for. "This is a big rivalry," said Burnes. "There's some bad blood between us."

Even with the disappointing series loss to Santa Clara, the likes of Burnes and York provide plenty of reason for optimism. At the plate, second baseman Zach Kirtley, third baseman Anthony Villa and first baseman Collin Ferguson have been three of the team's key cogs.

Kirtley, a true freshman at 18 years old, is swinging at a clip of .362. The junior Villa meanwhile has been supplying Saint Mary's with lots of pop, connecting on 13 doubles and four home runs. Ferguson has also been providing all sorts of power.

The senior was drafted by the Oakland A's in the 23rd round a season ago, but opted to spend one more season at the collegiate level. Ferguson, who leads the Gaels in doubles (16), home runs (seven) and slugging percentage (.520), has certainly boosted his draft stock. "He could be drafted higher. He should be," said Valenzuela. "He's gotten better in all aspects."

The same statement applies to the entire team, which has already won seven more games than a season ago. As Valenzuela makes abundantly clear, his plan for the future is simple: "I want this team to be a built winner for years to come."

The future is bright for the Saint Mary's College baseball team. With a 9-15 record in the conference (23-24 overall), the squad sits in ninth place in the WCC standings, but the Gaels are trending upward.

"We've grown. We've gotten better. We've won some big games," said head coach Eric Valenzuela. "I'm definitely proud of this group. They fight just as good as any team I've ever been a part of, coaching wise. So, yeah, I think the program is on the rise."

Valenzuela is wrapping up his second season at the helm in Moraga, and the skipper has brought some big-time talent to the diamond at Louis Guisto Field. At the top of that list is right-hander Corbin Burnes.

"Success in college baseball starts on the mound," explained Valenzuela. "And when you have a guy, a legitimate Friday guy, draft, major-



Former Acalanes standout Johnny York at the mound.

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