

2009 GCU Baseball Season Outlook

The upcoming Grand Canyon University baseball season is about re-establishing the tradition.

Coming off a disappointing 12-39 season, the Antelopes have made strides to get back to old form.

A corps of veterans hungry for victories and eager to get out the bad taste of 2008 will be joined by promising newcomers in hopes of vaulting the Lopes back to their winning ways.

“We established early that there was going to be a different attitude,” said head coach Dave Stapleton, in his ninth season as skipper. “There’s more talk, like in the past, about winning championships.”

The program is deep in tradition, winning four NAIA championships in a seven-year span from 1980-1986. Thirteen players have moved on to play in the big leagues, including World Series champions Tim Salmon and Chad Curtis, as well as, Stapleton.

Now a NCAA Division II program, the Antelopes play in the new Pacific West Conference, which will determine its champion with a postseason tournament.

The new conference does not have an automatic bid for one of six NCAA West Region tournament spots, so games against other region opponents (many from the CCAA and RMAC) will be just as important as those against PacWest teams.

To help get the Lopes back on the winning track, Stapleton and Co. reinforced the pitching staff with promising newcomers to go with a solid group of vets.

Tom Catomer, Mark Hardy and Chris Shelley lead a group of veteran right handers. The team did not have any lefties last season. That has changed with the addition of southpaws, Damion Swisher, Joey Bristyan, Kevin Burbank and Carlos Chavez. More pitching help comes with frosh right-handers Casey Collins, Ryan Jones (also an infielder) and Santos Villanueva.

Stapleton calls Jeff Mutchler and Austin Stockfisch, a second team all-conference choice last year, two of the best catchers the program has had in a long time. They lead an offense that includes PacWest first-team third baseman Matt Fox along with veterans Byron Reischl, Tyler Bair, Tate Ford and Joey Jacobsen. Stockfisch led the team with a .373 batting average. Fox hit .366.

Freshman infielder P.J. Garcia is another newcomer hoping to fit in the mix.

Stapleton likes the new group, but also knows they must grow up fast and be able to adjust to a bigger, faster, stronger more demanding game than they faced in high school.

They’ll get help from the vets who are striving to build good team chemistry from top to bottom.

“All are doing a great job of putting the focus on winning and not putting focus on themselves, but on the team,” said Stapleton of the returnees.

“I think the biggest challenge (facing us this season) will be coming to the ballpark every day with that winning attitude and trying to understand that other teams will look at us as 12-39,” said Stapleton. “We need to understand that is not us any more. That will be hardest thing to overcome. If we lose three in a row, are we going to be able to rebound and get back on track and not put our heads down.”