

1983: BATTLIN' BRONCOS WIN IT ALL

by Brian Pickering

The year was 1983. A memorable one as far as the Cal Poly Pomona baseball team is concerned. Call it amazing, shocking, spectacular, or even unbelievable, but no matter how it is termed the bottom line will still read, Broncos — NCAA National Champions.

"I can't believe it, they just kept battlin'," Cal Poly coach John Scolinos said. "That's been our trademark. I'm really impressed with this young team."

And young was right. The Broncos only had nine seniors on a squad of 27 players, and even then, many of those seniors didn't even start.

In fact, the set line-up most of the season included three freshmen, three sophomores, one junior and two seniors. And included in the pitching staff, there was another freshman, a reliever at first but a starter by mid-season.

Because of this fact nobody, not even Scolinos, thought his team could reach the playoffs, let alone take the crown of Kings of Division II baseball.

The Cal Poly team that won three of four games in the Western Regionals against San Francisco State and won four straight in the World Series, was not the same team that took the field at the beginning of the season.

What the Broncos possessed at the end was finesse and determination. What else would it be called when a team looked like champions of a grave digging contest at the outset.

At the start of the season, its youth and inexperience were shining bright as Cal Poly lost eight of their first 11 games and 13 of 24 going into league play.

All season long, and especially during the drought, Scolinos explained how a team had to have two of the three ingredients that contribute to a team's success. However, for the most part, the Broncos were unable to grasp upon those ingredients: pitching, defense and hitting.

Their worst luck came during the first nine games. After beginning with two victories, Cal Poly lost its next seven games, basically because of its inconsistent pitching and horrendous defense.

Scolinos' mound crew had a 4.57 ERA, while the defense committed 16 errors in six games, all occurring at the most inopportune times.

"Our pitching is so-so. It's kind of shaky outside of (Steve) Ziem. Control and the inability to change speeds are the problems," a frustrated Scolinos said.

Although Ziem, who is now pitching professionally for the Atlanta Braves short A team, had a 1-2 record because of the lack of help he was getting behind him, he did have a 1.61 ERA.

"The defense has collapsed, and it's primarily the same guys," Scolinos said. "You can't have steel hands."

Although the offense was also having its problems, hitting just .228, Scolinos wasn't overly worried about it. He saw signs that the wood department would work itself out, but at a gradual rate.

The Bronco hitters were hitting in streaks; some players were producing more than others, while others were slowly but surely starting to pick up the slack.

One player who was hitting just .108 after 10 games and .203 going into league play, was Tom Scaletta, who ended the season as a member of the second team All-Conference and World Series All-Tournament teams.

And going into this year, Scaletta has a chance of participating on the United States Olympic baseball team.

Things didn't even get much better when Cal Poly began play in the California Collegiate Athletic Association, as the Broncos bowed in their first four games.

However, the team then picked itself up and won 21 of its final 25 league games, recording a 21-8 CCAA record and first place finish. At one point, the Broncos won 18 of 20 games.

One of the highlights in league play was sweeping three games from arch-rival San Luis Obispo, the first time the Broncos had ever achieved that feat.

A large reason for the instant success was due to a loud, long and heralded hitting streak by junior sensation Larry Beardman.

On April 9, Beardman began a 31-game hitting skeep that would only be stopped because time had run out of the season. During the streak, he hit an amazing .420 while leading the team at season's end with a .405 batting average.

His efforts earned him selections to the first team All-Conference and second team Division II All-American teams, as well as the Most Valuable Player for the World Series when he hit .315 with 5 RBI and 6 hits.

However, the story of how Cal Poly went from rags to riches was due to how the young boys became men, and awfully fast.

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At the beginning of the season, freshmen Jeff Edwards, Adrian Valdivia, Marty Rivero, David Schuster and Kirk Washington were just five players trying to prove themselves worthy of a varsity ranking.

Little did anyone know at that time that all five athletes would greatly enhance the team's outcome.

Outside of Washington who was the pitcher, the freshmen players averaged 47 games in Cal Poly's 63 game schedule, drove in 89 runs and scored 82 more.

Edwards, who was the catcher and played in every game but one, was no pushover at the plate, as he was second on the team in walks.

The star player batted .262 on the year and was named to the second team All-Conference list. In the series, Edwards hit .437 with two home runs.

Equally as impressive, considering the amount of time he received to prove himself, was Rivero. After Valdivia injured his left knee sliding into the plate in late April, Rivero was forced to fill the void left at third base.

Although he had only played in 20 games by season's end, Rivero had shown he could play varsity ball.

In game two of the World Series against Florida State, Rivero collected five RBI's on a double and a three-run homer that won the game.

Meanwhile, on the mound, Washington became the mainstay of the pitching crew after he shook off some early season struggles.

After being named the CIF 4-A Player of the Year, among other awards received the year

before at nearby Walnut High School, Washington proved it wasn't a fluke.

He concluded his first collegiate year by going 6-3, saving two games, striking out 81 batters in 96 innings and holding a 2.79 ERA, the lowest on the team.

Washington pitched a four-hitter and struck out six to advance Cal Poly past San Francisco St. and into the Series, while shutting out Valdosta St., 3-0, on 10 strike outs and six hits in the third game of the Series.

Washington was selected to the series All-Tournament team.

Senior pitchers Ziem and Steve Gomez led the way for Cal Poly all season, combining for 24 wins and a 2.97 ERA.

Ziem was the team leader in strike outs, as he recorded 120 in 157 innings, with Gomez adding 83 in 136 innings for second place.

Besides Ziem, last year's coach Dennis Rogers, Beardman and Gomez are also involved in professional ball today.

Rogers repeated success as coach of the Oakland A's single A team in Medford, Oregon, leading the club to a championship three months after Cal Poly's. Ironically, Beardman and Gomez were on his team.

At the end of the season last year, Scolinos was named the CCAA Coach of the Year for the fourth time and the Division II Coach of the Year for the third time in his 22nd year at Cal Poly.

And just before this season began, Scolinos was paid the highest honor of all, the selection as pitching coach for the U.S. Olympic baseball team this summer.

