

# Bronco Baseball 2003 Season Outlook

The 2002 season was successful at Santa Clara University for many reasons. First year head coach Mark O'Brien guided the Broncos to their best record since the 1998 season, including a winning conference record and a second place finish in the WCC Coast Division. There were three All-West Coast Conference selections, one All-West Region selection and one First Team All-America selection.

Combine last year's success with the fact that the Broncos lost only three seniors and added 13 talented newcomers to the 2003 squad and the outlook looks very promising.

Entering his second year as the skipper of the Broncos, O'Brien speaks openly of his team's expectations, strengths and weaknesses for the upcoming 2003 season.

"The first thing we need to do is take care of business in conference play," said O'Brien. "You have to crawl before you walk. We need to try and take care of ourselves in the West Coast Conference before we think about anything else. This conference will be tougher this year than it was last year. I think we have the ability to contend for our league title, and that is where our focus is right now."

Contending for the league title means playing well for 30 games as they take on seven teams in two divisions. The WCC Coast Division consists of Santa Clara, Gonzaga, Pepperdine and Saint Mary's. The WCC West Division is made up of Loyola Marymount, Portland, San Diego and San Francisco. The winner of each division will meet for the conference championship at the end of the season to determine the recipient of the league's automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament.

In 2002, the University of San Diego defeated Pepperdine in three games for the inaugural WCC Tournament Championship crown. They went on to the NCAA West Regional hosted by Arizona State where they were ousted in game three by ASU.

Of the 26 first and second team All-WCC members in 2002, 14 of them were juniors or younger in eligibility, meaning many talented players return to make the conference one of the strongest on the West Coast.

One of the biggest keys for the Broncos in 2003 will be senior leadership. Eight players return for their senior

year of eligibility, giving the Broncos one of their most experienced teams in recent memory.

"I am really excited about our senior class this year," said O'Brien. "They really stepped up their leadership role in fall ball which will hopefully make a big difference once spring rolls around. I can't tell you how proud I am of them for that."

"Having said that, the fall is much different from the real season that begins in January. To this point we really haven't had any down, or troubling times. But I think with the solid core of leaders that we have, if the tough times do come, we will be ready for them."

Two of the eight returners were selected to the All-WCC Honorable Mention squad as juniors. Jim Wallace and Matt Travis each earned their first postseason honors for their efforts in 2002.

Wallace, a catcher from Reno, Nev., returns after posting incredible numbers during his junior year. He batted .330 with 12 home runs and 44 runs batted in. He was named WCC Player of the Week twice and the Player of the Month in April after batting .444 with eight home runs, five doubles and 26 RBI in that month alone.

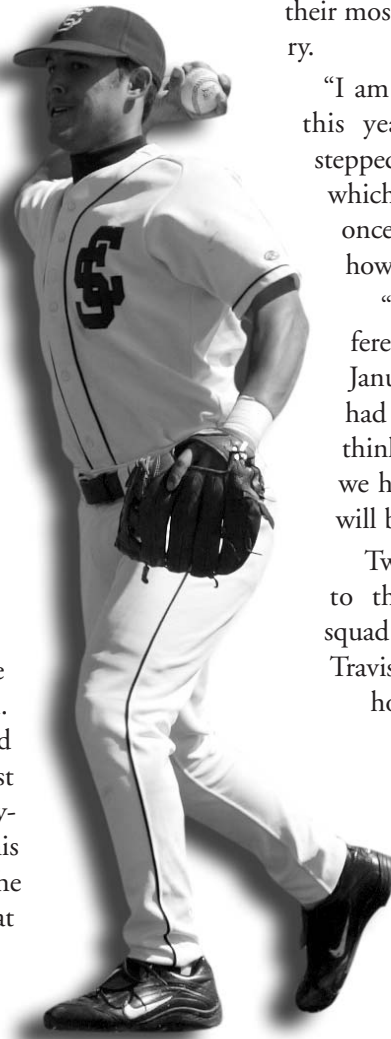
A.J. LaBarbera

"Wallace established himself as one of the best catchers on the West Coast last year," said O'Brien. "He put up tremendous offensive numbers and handled the pitching staff about as well as anyone could last year."

"He is a tremendous leader with a heartfelt desire to see this team succeed. He understands that personal success comes as a part of the team's success, and he does a fantastic job of directing this team defensively, and leading it offensively. If he can have another year like he did last year, we should be in good shape."

Travis, a left-handed starting pitcher from Glendora, Calif., takes to the mound again after being named the team's Pitcher of the Year following a year in which he went 5-4 with a 4.35 ERA. Most notably though, he limited opposing batters to a team-best .266 average.

"Travis will be a huge part of our pitching staff this year," said O'Brien. "He established himself as one of, if



not the best starting pitcher we have. There were times last year where his stuff was almost unhittable and he definitely gave us a chance to win each time he took to the mound.

“He will be a workhorse for us this year. He will eat up a lot of innings because of his physical and mental makeup. He added more movement to his fastball in the off-season and his changeup is vastly improved. He is someone who can go out there and throw 7-8 innings each start which will only make our bullpen even deeper and that much more effective.”

The depth and effectiveness of the bullpen is an area that O’Brien wants to see great improvement over last year’s team. Last year’s bullpen had an 8-9 combined record and a 6.77 ERA. But it was the .314 opponent batting average and the 69 walks that allowed many of the inherited runners to score.

“One of our glaring weaknesses last year was the bullpen,” said O’Brien. “It was a little unfair for us to bring in the guys we had to in certain situations, but it gave them good experience in tough situations. This year our bullpen experience and depth are greatly improved. If we stay healthy, we should have a complete turnaround from last year.”

Adding to the depth and the experience of the bullpen is senior southpaw Joe Diefenderfer. As a junior, Diefenderfer led the team in innings pitched with 103 1/3 innings of work to go along with his 4-6 record and 4.77 ERA. He threw three complete games in his 15 starts while also making one appearance out of the bullpen.

“Joe is a very steady and reliable player,” said O’Brien. “He will unbelievably valuable to this year’s pitching staff. He is a very capable starter as evidenced by his numbers last year, but we think he would be even more effective out of the bullpen. In order for that to happen we need somebody to step up and become a reliable starter, but if that does not happen, we have every confidence that Joe will put us in a position to win each time he takes the mound.

“He will also see time in the outfield. He is a very steady defender that has good speed to be able to chase balls down. He has a chance to be a swing guy for us. Maybe closing a game Friday night and starting a game on Sunday. Our pitching coach, Tom Myers did that his sen-

ior in college and was very effective doing so. I think Joe has an opportunity to be just as effective during his senior year.”

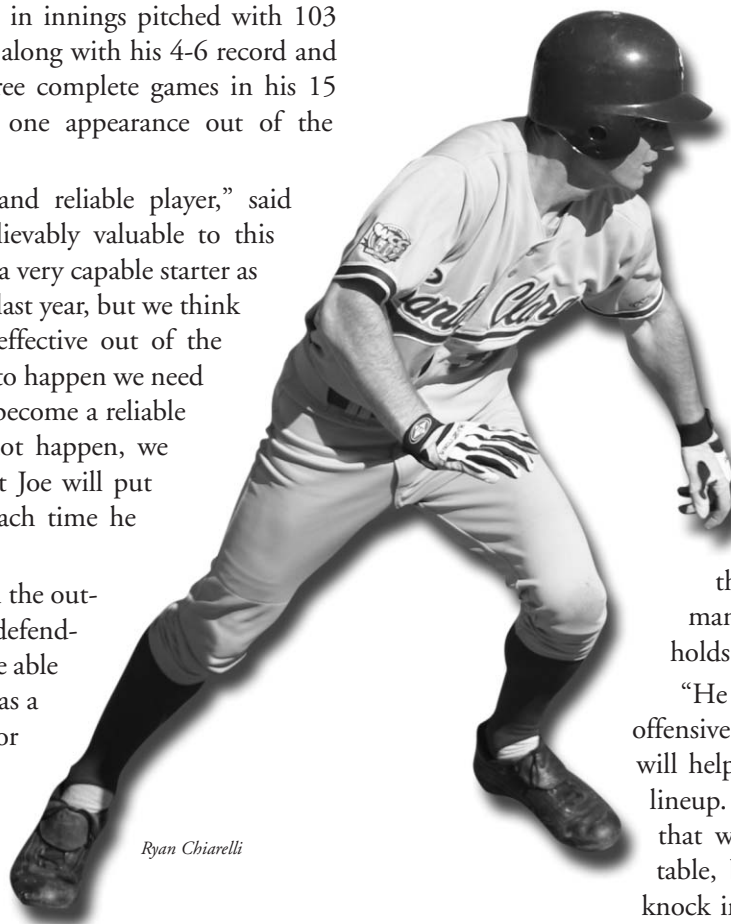
Another area that O’Brien is looking for the Broncos to improve upon from last year is their defense. The .957 team fielding percentage ranked near the bottom of the WCC and led to 81 unearned runs.

“Again, it is probably unfair to say that because we had some players playing out of position last year and that was difficult for us,” said O’Brien. “This year I think the difference will be night and day. That being said, we will more than likely have two freshmen starting in key positions on the infield. Behind them are a few other freshmen and sophomores that are still relatively new to the collegiate game.

One of the players who had to play out of position early in the year was A.J. LaBarbera. He began the year at a position he had never played, shortstop. After a tough go of things early on, making 15 errors in the team’s first 16 games, LaBarbera moved back to his natural position of second base and made only four errors in the final 40 games. Offensively, he added a great deal to the lineup, batting .342 with eight doubles, four home runs and 35 runs batted in.

“A.J. will be the anchor of our infield this year,” said O’Brien. “We will have a fairly new infield all the way around this year except for A.J. He will more than likely be flanked on his right side by two freshman, while on his left side will be one of two sophomores we have at first base. He is a fantastic communicator in the infield and very confident in his ability. Although the catcher has to be the general on the field, our second baseman will be the anchor that holds our ship steady.

“He also had a very good offensive year as a junior, which will help us in the middle of the lineup. He is a gap-to-gap hitter that will not only help set the table, but he has the ability to knock in a few runs if given that



Ryan Chiarelli

situation. He will be very valuable for us this year.”

Alongside LaBarbera near the top or the middle of the batting order will be another valuable senior leader in Jack Headley. The Gilroy, California native returns for his fourth and final year on the Mission Campus after having a sub-par year by his standards in 2002. During his freshman and sophomore years he accumulated a .360 batting average with 30 doubles, seven triples, five home runs, 65 RBI and 27 stolen bases. As a junior he slipped a little down to a .254 average but still produced 37 runs batted in and a league leading 21 stolen bases.

“Jack put up some incredible numbers his first two years here at Santa Clara,” said O’Brien. “Last year his numbers, although many would love to have them, were down a little. But, the good news in that in my eyes, is that there is no way he can have another year like that. He is too good of a player as evidenced by what he did his first two years.

“I look for him to have another big year in 2003 if he is able to stay within himself and do what he does best. His strengths lie in hitting the ball from gap to gap, going and getting balls in the outfield, scoring a lot of runs and stealing a bunch of bases.”

Alongside the proven seniors are 13 newcomers to the Santa Clara system. Two transfers and 11 freshman make up the new faces in the Broncos’ uniforms.

Scott Shapiro and Will Thompson each transferred to Santa Clara from division I schools in major baseball conferences. Shapiro, a 6-6 pitcher, begins his Bronco baseball career after one year at Vanderbilt. The tall right-hander has topped his fast ball out in the mid-90’s and has shown movement on the ball at that speed. He also has some pop at the plate, belting six home runs in the Southeastern Conference last year as a freshman.

Thompson comes to Santa Clara from the University of Arizona where in his first collegiate year he appeared in 32 games in which he belted 17 hits, three of which were triples, while knocking in nine runs. He also picked up 14 walks and had a fielding percentage of .990 at first base.

“Will gives us a left handed hitter that we can use in the middle of the lineup,” said O’Brien. “Not only did he

do well at the plate in his first year in a tough conference, but he fielded his position very well and we look forward to having his glove on the right side of the infield.”

Of the 11 freshmen on the 2003 team two pitchers, two infielders and one outfielder have legitimate shots at contributing right away. Right-handed pitchers Scott Lonergan and Andrew Slorp are both 6-feet-5 and over 200 pounds. They can both reach speeds in the low 90’s and have the potential to be dominant starters on the collegiate level.

Infielders Michael Lange and Michael Thompson should comprise the left side of the infield for Santa Clara. Lange comes to the Mission Campus from the highly regarded Bishop Amat High School in Southern California where he re-wrote much of the school’s record book. Thompson also played in Southern California at Villa Park High School.

“What you have on our left side are two players who will make a huge impact right away,” said O’Brien. “Lange is a scrappy player that is as sure-handed defensively as

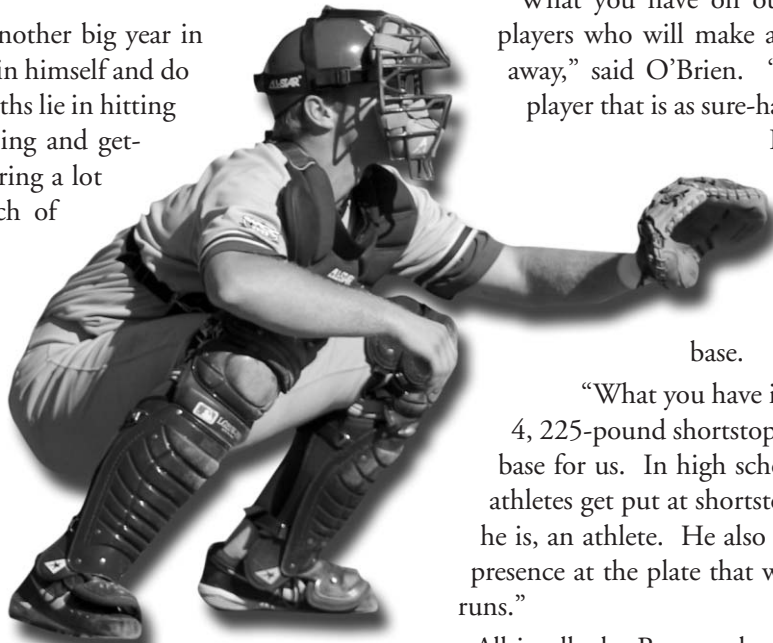
I have seen in a freshman, while his offense is pretty solid as well. He knows how to get on

base.

“What you have in Thompson is a 6-4, 225-pound shortstop who will play third base for us. In high school ball, all the best athletes get put at shortstop, and that is what he is, an athlete. He also has an intimidating presence at the plate that will help us generate runs.”

All-in-all, the Broncos have a good combination of leadership, talent, role players and scrapers. It is a team designed for the ballpark it plays in, and molded after the coaches who lead them.

“Our defensive makeup and pitching staff should do very well in Buck Shaw Stadium this year,” said O’Brien. “It is a big park that lends itself to a more defensive team. We have a chance to make our home park one that really works to our advantage. And to tell the truth, I think good pitching and good defense will win more games than the power game will at this point. We play in some tough parks on the road this year, but if we are consistent in our defense and our pitching, we should have some success on the road as well.”



Jim Wallace