



2008 Crabs could be 'best team in a while'

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The 2008 Crabs should pack some punch at the plate, and, according to manager Matt Nutter, could be the “best” squad the club has fielded in some time.

“Basically, I think we’ve got the whole package,” said Nutter. “I think from what I’ve seen, this is the best team we’ve had in a while.”

That could be particularly true at the plate, with several standout hitters on the roster.

“I think we’re going to have some power definitely,” said Nutter, who added with a laugh that they may not be the fastest team on the bases. “We’re going to be more of a slugging team.”

Nutter had hoped to bring back local standout Tyson Fisher, but the Fortuna native, a senior at South Dakota State, has opted to sit out and see what happens in the draft before weighing his options.

In his absence, however, the South Dakota connection is alive and well, with four of Fisher’s former Jackrabbit teammates on this summer’s roster, including catcher Tony Martin, who is expected to have a big impact.

“I’ve heard a lot of good things about Tony Martin,” said Nutter. “He’s a small guy, but you get a lot of bang for your buck, and he’s got a cannon of an arm.”

San Jose State utility player Cory Valine is also expected to play a big role this summer, as is Fresno State infielder Jordan Ribera, a 6-foot, 2-inch, 230-pound lefty.

Among the key returning players are Jeff Giacomini, Richard Cates and John Parham, all three of whom had standout seasons a year ago.

Giacomini, a Ukiah native, led the team in batting (.402) and home runs (six) in 2007 and was named MVP of the Horizon Air Summer Series, beating out the top collegiate players in California.

Cates, meanwhile, will be playing his third season with the Crabs and batted .400 in 2007 with a team-high 52 RBIs. He has played several infield and outfield positions for the team.

Parham, a fan favorite who stole home on opening day last summer, is tentatively scheduled to return to

the team in 2008, but was waiting this week to see where he was drafted.

Parham and Cates are both coming off spectacular seasons at Cal State Northridge.

Also back from 2007 is center fielder Bobby Ethel, a speedy sophomore out of the University of San Francisco, who batted .286 with 18 stolen bases in 2007, as well as Oregon State infielder Dale Solomon, who batted .352 with 21 RBIs last summer.

But if the hitting and defense looks solid for 2008, the pitching is a bit of an unknown quantity, although Nutter is confident he'll have plenty of depth.

"I think the pitching is probably our biggest unknown, but I'm not real concerned about it," the third-year manager said.

The Crabs lost standout Derrick Miramontes, who was scheduled to return to the team this year and be the staff ace, but backed out at the request of his college coach a few weeks ago.

Nutter, however, will welcome back Reed Brown out of Oregon State, who went 5-1 last summer with a 2.85 ERA, starting six games and appearing in eight.

Kirby Morsching out of South Dakota State is also expected to play a big role on the mound this summer, while Arcata native Alex Leisten out of Santa Rosa JC will make his Crabs debut in 2008.

Leisten is one of three locals on the 2008 roster, joining a pair of returning players, Eureka's Zack Smith, who will serve as player/assistant coach, and Arcata's Greg Fisher, who went 1-1 in six appearances in 2007.

The 2008 Crabs season gets under way on Saturday against the Fairfield Indians.



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Crabs gather, hold first two practices

Neil Tarpey/The Times-Standard

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ARCATA -- Only three days before opening day, they held their first practice.

This is the name of the game for the Humboldt Crabs, who must wait for their full complement of collegiate baseball stars to finish academic studies or other commitments before traveling to Arcata.

Under sunny skies on Wednesday at 4 p.m., manager Matt Nutter stood in the middle of a circle of ballplayers in foul territory near third base and welcomed them to the summer of 2008.

Dressed in shorts, wearing sunglasses, Nutter leaned on a bat in his right hand, and gestured upwards with his left, as if to say, "If we play as a team, the sky's the limit."

The squad broke up, with infielders Beck Wheeler, Derrick Chung, and Ryan Silver stepping into the batting cage to alternate taking hacks. Pitchers and catchers adjourned to the bullpen in the left-field corner, while the rest gravitated to the outfield to throw and field balls being smacked in their direction.

Wheeler, an infielder from University of the Pacific, heard about the Crabs from Tigers' coach Jim Yanko.

"He said there was good competition, good coaches and that it was a winning program," said Wheeler.

What about the difference between using wooden bats -- which the Crabs returned to in the 1999

season -- and metal bats, still used in college?

"Wooden bats can be barrel heavy," said Wheeler. "There's more pop with metal."

Apparently there's sufficient pop in wood, because on Wheeler's second swing in his next turn in the cage the freshman blasted a ball high and far out onto U.S. 101 South.

Chung, a shortstop from Sacramento State, also joined the Crabs after one of his coaches told him about it.

"I heard it was nice up here," said Chung. "Coach (Don) Barbara recommended it to me."

During infield drills later in practice, Chung showed off a lively arm and I was not surprised to learn that he made five appearances as a relief pitcher for the Hornets.

Silver, from City College of San Francisco, went about his business in a workmanlike manner.

He may turn out to swipe a few bases for the Crabs, since Silver was successful in 42 of 49 attempts for the Rams this year.

Right-hand relief pitcher Kirby Morsching -- brother of Kevin, whose tragic death following the 2007 season shocked the Crabs faithful -- led South Dakota State in saves this spring and joins the Crabs along with three Jackrabbit teammates.

One of the trio, catcher Tony Martin, showcased an accurate cannon of a right arm during infield practice.

Martin, because he grew up in the American heartland in Omaha, Neb., told me that he had yet to see the ocean -- for the first time ever.



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"But I've seen the (Humboldt) Bay," said Martin, who can now boast that he survived driving across U.S. Highway 36 from Red Bluff, which surprised him by narrowing to one-lane in spots without warning.

By the time Thursday's second practice arrived, more players had rolled into town and the skies turned gray.

At least one South Dakota State player -- Morsching -- had seen the Pacific, as his summer job for the blood bank took him to Crescent City and back.

Dakota Watts, the 6-foot-5 right-hander who started 11 games this year for San Joaquin Delta College, may be familiar to College of the Redwoods baseball fans.

In 2007 Watts was a first-team all Golden Valley Conference selection -- along with current Crabs teammate, lefty Greg Fisher of CR, and 2007 Crab Derrick Miramontes -- when he won six games for undefeated league champion Feather River College.

The versatile defender and hard-hitting Richard Cates, returning for his third year with the Crabs, took part in Thursday's practice.

Cates hit .400 for the 2007 Crabs, leading the team in doubles (15) and RBIs (52). He is coming off a great season at Cal State Northridge, where he led the squad in average (.350) and RBIs (41).

The arrival of Cates and another familiar face, Zack Smith, seems to indicate that it's almost time for the plate umpire to yell, "Play Ball."