

Crusaders Out to Make a Name for Themselves

By DAN LONG

Thursday, Mar 31st, 2011

ORADELL--With opening day soon approaching, there is a sense of optimism and excitement surrounding the Crusader varsity baseball program, two ingredients for success that has been missing in recent seasons. The Red & Gold have developed strong team chemistry throughout the month-long preseason and have Head Coach Jim Burt eager to begin the 2011 spring campaign.

A BC baseball fan would be hard pressed to find any news on the team if they solely relied on *The Record* as their news source. To say that the Crusaders are flying under the radar would be an understatement, as only a few sentences were reserved in the baseball season preview about the boys from Oradell, and not a mention in the Top 20 poll. While even though BC seems mired in a type of "media Siberia", the Crusaders will certainly try to use their low-profile as a source of motivation while battling others for supremacy in Bergen County and in the Non-Public State Playoffs. The team has the tools and the talent to make some noise this spring, but as Coach Burt believes, this team just needs to add the important factor of overall confidence to their game that will lead to more victories.

BC's pitching will fall on the shoulders of two of their senior leaders in Dylan Reid and Toby Schwartz. With both pitchers healthy this season, BC can present a 1-2 punch at the top of their rotation that could rival other staffs in the area. Burt glowed when reporting how dominant Reid was in the team's recent preseason games in South Carolina last weekend when he stated, "Reid threw a no-hitter against the best team we played down there, the same team who the day before had mercy-ruled Paramus Catholic." Reid presents the entire arsenal of pitches at his disposal, led by a powering fastball and wicked off-speed and breaking balls. Schwartz, coming off an injury-plagued junior season, also presents an ace-like quality to his pitching talent and will be leaned on for big games. Another senior, Mike Parente, will get the ball on opening day. Burt complemented Parente's varsity experience and his ability to pitch to contact as factors for getting the first start of the season. Freshman Anthony Apreda has been exciting to watch in the preseason as the team's second hardest thrower, and Andrew Fusco will be another senior hurler who will factor into the starting pitching rotation. Coach Burt sees a lot of promise and talent in his pitching staff but still worries about a lack of depth and inexperience with his bullpen, which could lead to Reid and Schwartz finishing out each other's games if need be, unless the team can find another consistent and reliable option as the closer.

When looking at BC's position players, Coach Burt stresses a return to the fundamentals that BC has gotten away from in recent years. "Our strengths are our speed, bunting and getting guys over, hit and runs, being aggressive on the field." This focus on small ball may lead to some frustrating times for their opponents, who must always stay on their guard against BC's aggressive base running and blue-collar attitude. Even though their offensive success may be predicated on speed this spring, the Crusaders could still produce with the long ball and the power game. "We hit three home runs in our first scrimmage against Ramsey, so we can still hit for power, but we're just not going to rely solely on that." Ryan Kelly, BC's starting left fielder, may be the poster boy for BC's offense this season as the team's leadoff hitter. Kelly is a pesky

contact hitter who always manages to churn out long at-bats and make contact in order to get on base. Coach Burt was impressed at how Kelly even stole 5 bases in 3 games in South Carolina and really thrust himself into the BC lineup based on his impressive preseason. Reid and Schwartz will provide offensive punch along with their pitching prowess, and outfielders Charles Chen and Eric Flanagan will look to make a difference from the top of the lineup. With BC's gap-hitting attack and speed on the base paths, the Red & Gold will look to put up big numbers in innings this season.

When identifying some of his team's weaknesses from this preseason, Coach Burt immediately looked to the problem of errors on the infield that has seemingly lured it ugly face around BC's program for the last decade. Coach Burt believes it's a case of confidence, where guys easily perform each day in practice yet lose focus come gameday. BC cannot afford to kick the ball around the infield if they hope to sustain leads for their top pitchers, and Coach Burt and his staff are still looking for the right combinations on the infield to make sure that errors don't cost them games, especially since BC's offense may not come in bunches in the form of 3-run homers or grand slams. Again the factor that may lead to improved defensive infield play will be improved confidence from both the experienced and inexperienced varsity players.

What separates this year's BC team from previous squads has to be the level of chemistry that the team has already developed in the offseason and in the past few weeks of March. This BC team may not have the same number of star individual players that other teams can trot out of their dugouts on a daily basis, but this Crusader team, led by the senior class, has a collective chip on their shoulders and wants to regain the swagger and confidence of the past. This BC team knows from their undefeated preseason that they can compete with and dominate some of the best that Bergen County has to offer, like they did against Ramsey. The talent and teamwork is there this season, the biggest question mark will be the overall team psyche and level of confidence. Can the defense step up, and will other pitchers emerge to provide some much needed depth to the staff? Coach Burt and his Crusaders are excited to run onto the field to finally start their 2011 season after a long offseason. Energy, excitement, and optimism surround the BC baseball program this spring, and if the Crusaders start to win, the headlines and newspaper articles will soon follow. For now, BC doesn't mind be the unknown team, just as long as they make a name for themselves in May.