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## El Camino College Softball Hopes New Energy Brings New Success

A new season is bringing new energy from the softball field at El Camino College. A young Warrior team is starting fresh, looking beyond last year's season that finished with just three victories in South Coast Conference play and not many more out of conference.

Elaine Martinez takes over in 2012 as the new head coach and she, along with assistant coach Melissa Sanchez, hopes to use past successes to change the culture at El Camino College.

"I think we are just bringing this energy that (the team is) feeding off of," Martinez said. "We know what we want to do and what we expect of the team and they are doing a good job of just following along with that."

The former Pasadena College Student Athlete of the Year takes the reins of a Warriors squad eager to record its first winning season since 2008. Martinez comes to El Camino College after serving as the head coach for Pasadena City College from 2007 to 2010. Before her coaching days, Martinez was a pitcher for Pasadena in 2001 and 2002, where she won 32 games and became the all-time strikeout leader in PCC history with 272. She broke the single-season strikeout record in 2002 when she fanned 166 batters. The two records stood for three seasons before they were broken in 2005.

Martinez sees the Warriors pitching staff this season as one of the team's biggest strengths, no small compliment coming from someone with her background. The staff is led by ace Marissa Merced.

But she also sees potential with the Warriors defense this year and expects her team to be able to help out the pitchers with excellent fielding.

"I think defensively we are going to be able to hold ourselves into some games because we have paid a lot of attention to throwing mechanics and groundball mechanics such as seeing the ball in (to the glove)," Martinez said. "We have had some really good workouts where we have looked really good defensively."

On the other side of the ball, Martinez has every confidence that the Warriors offense will be able to provide much-needed run support for the Warriors pitching staff, thanks in large part to her longtime friend and assistant coach Sanchez.

"I am confident with what Coach 'Mel' is doing with them in terms of hitting," Martinez said. "I am expecting (the team) to be able to help our pitchers by making some plays defensively and for us to be able to put some runs on the board that will allow our pitchers to settle in and focus on the job they need to do."

Sanchez was quite the hitter herself during her playing days. She made the varsity team at Rosemead High School in her freshman year, where she played first, second and third base. Sanchez made the All-League First Team in her sophomore and senior seasons, leading L.A. County with 13 home runs in her final year of high school, helping her get named the Mission Valley League's Most Valuable Player.

Sanchez continued to hit the stitching off the ball at the University of California at Riverside, where she made the All Big West First team from 2004-06. She holds the single-season record at UC Riverside with 63 games played and a whopping .744 slugging percentage. She also set career records for the Highlanders with 105 runs scored, 199 hits, 26 home runs, 116 runs batted in, 127 walks and a .466 on-base percentage.

If Sanchez can pass even a fraction of those skills onto the team, the Warriors offense could be a big surprise for opposing teams this season.

In fact, the team has already turned some heads from the opposition before the season has even begun with their solid efforts playing a few games in the Fall League.

"Some of our girls have heard from some of the girls from other programs that, 'Hey, El Camino's really coming along, they look different,'" Martinez said. "(Our girls) get really pumped up about (that).

"(We want) to take them to the next level," Martinez said. "I want there to be a level of respect where they (opponents) know they are going to get real competitive softball and I also want us to be a well-respected program in terms that we are a class act and we represent the college in a good light."

The road to success does promise to be a long one, however, as the Warriors play in "the toughest conference in the state of California," according to Martinez.

"It's baby steps," Martinez said. "Just work on what we've been doing here and let's see if we can execute the things that we have improved on out in the games. If you are going to play, then why not play against the best so we are lucky in that and at the same time we have got a lot of work to do to be able to compete with them."

The coaches themselves are not the only new faces on the team. Aside from a few returners, most of the players are donning the Warriors uniform for the first time, a fact that has definitely helped with the transition to a new coach and team attitude.

Despite the new faces, Martinez expects a couple of the familiar ones to take big leadership roles this year. Vivian Santacruz and Eliana Gomez were a part of the team last year and Martinez named them as captains.

"They are both kind of leaders by example," Martinez said. "They always do what's expected of them without anyone having to tell them what to do."

Santacruz had 18 hits and nine RBI last year in 32 games. She also pitched 32.2 innings, striking out 10 batters.

Alia Williams is a newcomer to the team but Martinez expects big things from the 5-foot 7-inch centerfielder both on the field and in the dugout, naming her one of the captains.

"She has stepped in right away as a vocal leader," Martinez said. "When she speaks, they listen and they look toward her to lead them. Plus she's fast, has a gun for an arm and is just a smart softball player."

Martinez also expects catcher Faafili Taamilo, Barbara Goodwin and freshman Jacklyn Peyrefitte to step up as big contributors this season for the Warriors.

The 2012 season looks to be a year of hope and promise for the El Camino College softball program, filled with new blood and new energy. The team will get its chance to begin fulfilling that promise Friday when they host L.A. Valley in the first game of the season at the El Camino College Softball Field.