

North Top Seeds Ready For May Madness

-Sat., May 5 winners of all 12 noon and 2 p.m. games play at 4 p.m.
(see COA's "Regional Pairings" page for all games and times)

The rainy weather during last year's regional weekend may have been a bad omen for teams in Northern California. In some cases, two-day state-qualifiers turned into a four days of soggy softball.

This season, North teams competing at West Valley, Sacramento, San Mateo and San Jose, are hoping for kinder conditions and the opportunity to reverse the South's six-year stranglehold on the state title.

At the same time, top seeds in the North aren't exactly ready to surrender home-field advantage.

Here's a brief look at the four North regional sites, and what the host coaches had to say during regional week:

WEST VALLEY (SARATOGA)-SAT., MAY 5

12 noon, #1 West Valley (39-4) vs. #16 DeAnza (31-9-1)
2 p.m., #8 American River (26-11-1) vs. #9 Delta (30-11-1)

West Valley Head Coach Les Hearn can sum up his No. 1 Vikings in just two words: "We Hit."

West Valley (39-4) is averaging 7.4 runs per game, bats a whopping .445, has 25 home runs, and fields nine all-conference players.

"This is the best team I've ever had in my 29 years," says Hearn. "They love to play and they know the talent we have."

The talent starts at the top of the Viking order with 2001 State Player of the Year Ezzy Perez. Not only did the sophomore lead the Coast Conference with a .560 batting average, she also ranked first in overall hits (79) and steals (60) in 41 games.

Perez set the table for three All-State sluggers: freshman catcher Rachel Sherman (10 HR, 57 RBI); freshman first baseman Elyssa Sigala (8 HR, 57 RBI); and sophomore shortstop Kristi Robles (2 HR, 44 RBI), who's heading for Texas Tech University.

That's plenty of offensive support for a pitching staff that allows 1.6 runs per contest. Freshman ace Christina Yorkie, the Coast Pitcher of the Year, takes a 22-1 record and an 0.81 ERA into regional action.

West Valley, a team that started 16-0, has lost just four games this season—all by one run. They are also 3-1 vs. the North's 2, 3, and 4 seeds.

SACRAMENTO-SAT., MAY 5

12 noon, #2 Sacramento (35-8-1) vs. #15 Chabot (21-17)
2 p.m., #7 Solano (23-13) vs. #10 Sierra (38-9-1)

Robert Maglione, in his sixth season as Sacramento head coach, led his team to the Bay Valley Conference Gold Division crown with a 16-2 record.

The Panthers have won seven straight division crowns, since joining in 1995. Sacramento, winners of 10 straight games, placed two sophomores on the 2001 All-State team: pitcher Veronica Davis (23-5) and outfielder Nicole Valenzuela (.455). All-NorCal sophomore pitcher/designated player Elizabeth Sauerwein (12-2, .335) adds to the team's depth.

"This is a typical Sacramento softball team," says Maglione, the associate head coach of 1996's state championship club. "We play adequate defense, we pitch well, and we get enough offense to get the job done."

Sacramento, playing Chabot for the first time this season, is 1-2 overall against Sierra and 2-0 vs. Solano, the Bay Valley Conference Gold Division champs.

SAN MATEO-SAT., MAY 5

12 noon, #3 San Mateo (28-9) vs. #14 Diablo Valley (23-17)

2 p.m., #6 Redwoods (25-13) vs. #11 Merced (20-13)

SAN JOSE-SAT., MAY 5

12 noon, #4 San Jose (28-8) vs. #13 Sequoias (30-14)

2 p.m., #5 Fresno (27-15) vs. #12 Shasta (26-9)

San Jose doesn't mind playing the underdog role this season-so long as they reach the state championships.

The Jaguars are looking for their first-ever trip to the Final Eight, says 10-year coach Debbie Huntze-Rooney, and no time like the present.

San Jose hosted the No. 4 regional in 1996, but failed to capitalize on the home-field advantage. "We've always been close, but never gotten there," says Huntze-Rooney. "Just to get to Fresno would be a great experience for our team and we're excited about the chance this year."

San Jose finished 12-3 in the Coast Conference, one game behind West Valley.

All-NorCal pitcher/third baseman Kim Rose (15-4, .349) leads a strong Jaguar lineup, along with sophomore catcher Samantha Hess (.308). The Jaguars have also been getting solid performances from sophomore pitcher Jennifer Garcia (10-3).

"We really rely on pitching and defense," says Huntze-Rooney. "The team that can play behind their pitcher and play well under pressure will win the regionals this week. All of these teams can hit, but defense is the key."

San Jose spilt with Fresno this season, beat Sequoias, and is yet to play Shasta.