

## **Southern Favorites Eye Another State Title**

-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)

To some coaches in Southern California, this never gets old. The leaders of South perennial powers circled this weekend on the calendar-long before opening day.

"This is what it's all about," says one veteran coach. "It's do or die time," says another, "time for a new beginning."

Despite the cliches, for all intents and purposes, Saturday will indeed mark the start of a fresh season. And who knows that more than this year's top four South seeds.

All four schools have won state titles, contributing to the 16 of 23 championships captured by the region since 1978.

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

### **LONG BEACH-SAT., MAY 5**

12 noon, #1 Long Beach (36-2-1) vs. #16 Grossmont (20-11)  
2 p.m., #8 Canyons (26-11) vs. #9 Riverside (25-14-2)

Top-seed Long Beach, the 2000 state runners-up might be California's hottest team entering this weekend's regional action. It's hard to argue, based on a current 26-game unbeaten streak.

The Vikings breezed through the South Coast Conference-its 10th consecutive title-with a perfect 15-0 mark. Their only blemishes on the season: two one-run losses to No. 3 Fullerton, and a scoreless tie with No. 9 Riverside.

Long Beach is an impressive 17-2-1 against teams in the playoffs this season.

"Balance is the key for us," says coach Shellie McCall, who guided Long Beach to the state title in 1995. "Our defense has been awesome; we have great pitching; and I think we have more punch on offense than last season."

Long Beach dominated the All-South Coast Conference list with eight first-team selections, including Player of the Year Monnaye Bernal (All-State) and Pitcher of the Year Nina Distefano (All-State), who also won the honor in 2000. Bernal, a freshman first baseman, hit .382, with 46 RBI.

Distefano, a returning All-American, followed up her 30-win freshman season with a 19-2 overall mark. She struck out 103 batters in 124.7 innings, and her 0.56 ERA ranks among the state's best.

All-State centerfielder Denise Perez (.465, 42 runs, 16 steals) and All-SoCal second baseman Monique Palacios (.390, 28 RBI) help spark a Viking club that averages 6.8 runs per game.

"We struggled to score runs in the state tournament last year," says McCall. "I don't think we'll have that problem this time."

The Vikings are 1-0-1 vs. Riverside (3-1 win, 0-0 tie) and 1-0 vs. Canyons (4-3 win) this season. Long Beach has reached the Final Eight in eight of the last nine years.

### **PALOMAR (SAN MARCOS)-SAT., MAY 5**

12 noon, #2 Palomar (32-7) vs. #15 Victor Valley (31-12)

2 p.m., #7 Pasadena (25-16) vs. Antelope Valley (26-8-1)

Defending champion Palomar, enters regional play as the two seed. Last year the Comets blazed a trail to the state title, seeded third, giving coach Mark Eldridge state championship No. 3. Eldridge, in his 24th season, guided Palomar to its 16th straight Pacific Coast title this season, with a 15-0 record.

The Comets return just one starter from the 2000 champs, but also bring back the title game's winning hurler. Eldridge hopes sophomore centerfielder Joleen Metz (.454), an All-State selection, and State Pitcher of the Year Michelle Martinez (15-1, 0.26 ERA), will bring enough experience to carry the Comets back-to-back. Martinez gave up only three hits in the 1-0 championship win over No. 1 Long Beach a year ago.

The Comets also rely on production from All-State pitcher/infielder Bridget Starry (11-1; 33 RBI); All-State outfielder Naomi Senteno; and the All-SoCal catcher/designated duo of Brittany Yolo and Tiffany White.

"We still haven't played our best ball," says Eldridge. "We've been trying to play different people and try different lineups throughout the season, so we're hoping to peak this weekend."

The Comets are 1-2 vs. teams in their regional. They split with Victor Valley and lost to Pasadena earlier in the season.

### **FULLERTON-SAT., MAY 5**

12 noon, #3 Fullerton (32-9-1) vs. #14 Allan Hancock (17-18)

2 p.m., #6 Ventura (31-11) vs. #11 Cypress (29-15)

Fullerton, one of the state's youngest teams with just three sophomores, won its second straight Orange Empire Conference (co-champs with Santa Ana), for the first time in school history.

A sixth-straight 30-win season helped the Hornets secure a regional site for the second year in a row.

This is coach Lisa Bassi's tenth regional trip in 12 seasons. Fullerton, 1980 state champs, has reached the regional finals in each of the past six years. Bassi will be banking on All-OEC freshmen pitchers Colleen Burdick and Andee Lindgren to continue their control on the mound. Fullerton also returns 2000 All-American and OEC Player of the Year Lisa Schiro at second base.

The Hornets are yet to play their best softball, according to Bassi. Unlike most of the top seeds that have compiled long winning streaks during 2001, Fullerton held just two modest strings of seven and eight straight wins early in the year.

The team is also at full-strength for the first time all season, after being plagued by injuries.

"I like our chances," says Bassi. "We've been getting consistent, solid pitching. I think this is the right opportunity for us to be hitting on all cylinders."

Burdick (16-3, 0.83 ERA) ranked among the OEC's top players in batting average (.426), runs (21), hits (26), and steals (11).

Lindgren (15-6, 1.01 ERA) was just as strong on offense. The lefty led the OEC in doubles (10), and ranked second in conference average (.455) and slugging percentage (.652).

Burdick and Lindgren combined for 22 shutouts, surpassing the previous school record of 19 set by the 1980 state-championship team.

The Hornet offense is also propelled by Schiro (.380 overall) and freshman shortstop Loraine Pinedo (.299), both All-OEC selections.

### **SANTA ANA-SAT., MAY 5**

12 noon, #4 Santa Ana (33-11-1) vs. #13 Bakersfield (23-15-1)

2 p.m., #5 Chaffey (26-7) vs. #12 Cuesta (32-16)

The No. 4 Santa Ana Dons appear to be making another late-season bid for Fresno. Last season, Santa Ana won a South regional on the road, upsetting host Fullerton twice, to advance to the state championships.

This year, the Dons have won 13 of their last 16 games heading into the regionals, including a 9-1 finish to grab a share of the tough Orange Empire Conference.

"We've been playing our best softball during the last three-and-a-half weeks," says coach Kim Nutter, who guided the Dons to a third-place state finish in 1995.

"This is probably one of the strongest teams I've had in my 10 years. We have a great blend of power, defense, pitching and speed."

Santa Ana is sparked by California's 2001 Player of the Year, freshman Marie Caballero.

All Caballero did this year, was lead OEC players in batting average (.500), slugging percentage (.706), RBI (40), and overall hits (66). She was also one of the top OEC pitchers, ranking first in ERA (0.11), hits allowed per seven innings (2.19) and winning percentage (.857).

"Marie is a great competitor and I don't think there's a better swing in the game," says Nutter. "She's a good athlete, who's very versatile in the lineup."

The Dons were the OEC's top hitting team-batting .349-thanks in large part to All-SoCal infielder Ana Velasquez (.440), All-SoCal utility player Sharmaine Kendrick (.365), and All-OEC utility player Inez Vasquez (.394). Santa Ana tied Cuesta (1-1, in April), and is yet to face Chaffey or Bakersfield.

"Our regional is going to be very competitive," says Nutter. "We have two conference champions in Santa Ana and Chaffey, and two second-place teams. We haven't seen each other a lot, so it makes the tournament more exciting. It's going to be a good battle."

-Compiled for the COA by publicist Eric Mendoza.

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