

Baseball Set For Aoki's Third Season

Written by Sean Stires

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The eve of his third season as the Notre Dame baseball coach is upon Mik Aoki. The spotlight he is in does not even remotely compare to the one Brian Kelly had when he guided the Fighting Irish football team to a 12-0 regular season in his third season in charge in 2012, but like Kelly, Aoki has witnessed a marked difference in the way his team goes about its business now compared to when he took over.

"It's like night and day," Aoki said of the difference he sees in his players now compared to his first team two seasons ago. "I think there were a lot of kids who were playing for their own reasons. I think that it was a little bit fractured. I think these guys right now have gotten to a point where they expect good things to happen, but I don't think that was the case when we first got here."

Aoki took over at Notre Dame in 2011 after four years as head coach at Boston College. The Irish were 22-32 overall (10-17 Big East) in 2010 in what was Dave Schrage's fourth and final season at Notre Dame. Aoki's first Irish squad the next season was 23-29-1 and 13-13.

In order to produce more wins on the field Aoki and his staff had to work to repair that "fractured" atmosphere that was pervasive throughout the team. There was more accountability by the players; leadership was honed and higher daily expectations were set. The building process of the once proud program is far from complete, but Aoki believes players are at least pulling on the same rope.

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"I think that the general gravity of the team is to sort of pull guys up to the level of expectation," Aoki said of where the team's clubhouse camaraderie is now. "That is in the way that we work and the way that you conduct yourself both on and off the field. I think when I first got here we were pretty good as a program off the field, but I think on the field the gravity was to pull people down to mediocrity."

The Irish improved to 31-27 overall and 14-13 in the Big East in 2012. Aoki begins his third season when he heads to Sarasota, Fla this weekend against three solid teams - Florida Gulf Coast, Ohio State and Mercer. The non-conference schedule will get continually tougher early in the season, and how his team handles it is one of the bigger questions Aoki has heading into season three.

"How do we hold up, how does our mental outlook and where we are right now hold up once we're put under some pressure and face a little adversity," he said. "I guess I would want to see how hard our mental armor is; because you know it's coming."

Last year's non-conference schedule included five teams that qualified for the NCAA Tournament, and this year's non-league slate is even higher in difficulty. The Irish face two teams, UCLA and Kent State, that each advanced to the 2012 College World Series (Kent State is a two-game home set in late March) as well as other strong teams like Oklahoma, USC, Tennessee, Virginia Tech, and Big West foes Cal Poly and UC Santa Barbara.

"If we want to compete at the national level those are the people that you've gotta compete against," Aoki said candidly. "You've gotta beat them. I'm not saying we're going to win every one, but I think we're at a place from a personnel standpoint and everything else that to me there's no reason that we can't compete with those teams and come out successfully against them."

The Irish experienced their first taste of national success last year when they upset No. 11 LSU 7-1 in Baton Rouge in early March. The win over the Tigers marked Notre Dame's first road win over a higher ranked team since beating No. 1 Florida State in Tallahassee en-route to the 2002 College World Series.

With the psyche of the team now in a better place than it was three seasons ago, the personnel

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the Irish now have is also, arguably, as good as it has been since 2006 - the last season current LSU head coach Paul Mainieri coached at Notre Dame before heading to the Bayou.

The talent core is led by Dan Slania, Trey Mancini and Eric Jagielo. The trio thrived last summer in the prestigious Cape Cod summer league and will be counted on to make the Irish go this season.

Slania, the team's 6'5, 275 pound closer, had a 2.35 overall ERA last season that was a miniscule 0.75 in seven Big East appearances (12.0 IP) as a freshman in 2011. He was downright dominating last year, going 3-0 with a 2.03 ERA, 13 saves and 37 strikeouts in 31.0 innings. Aoki toyed with moving Slania from the bullpen to the starting rotation during fall practice, but ultimately decided to keep him where he is.

"I think there's a huge security blanket for a team to have a guy like that at the back end (of the bullpen)," Aoki said of his reasoning for not moving Slania into the rotation. "I also think it's disheartening, because the opposite is - who do you put back there if it's not him? I think if you're sort of experimenting on that deal and blow a couple of leads early in the season as you're trying to figure that out that can be really disheartening to a team."

A college baseball team's top three starting pitchers are known as a team's "weekend" rotation, because they start the Friday, Saturday and Sunday games of conference play. Senior Adam Norton and junior Sean Fitzgerald figure to be in that top three for most of the season. Fitzgerald posted a team-best 7-3 record last year, and sported a 3.82 ERA. Norton was 5-5 with a 4.32 ERA. The duo combined for 118 strikeouts and just 21 walks in 168 2/3 innings in 2012.

The pitching staff's x-factor is two-sport star Pat Connaughton. The sophomore will be with the Irish basketball team for as long as it stays alive and then join the weekend rotation as soon as he is available. Peter Gammons, a Cape Cod resident, recently touted Connaughton as one of next summer's top Cape prospects.

"We have to sort of stem the first five or six weekends of the year until we get Pat back," Aoki said. "When Pat comes out, whenever that happens to be, I think he'll relatively quickly get plugged into that (weekend) role too."

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Connaughton's absence means the Irish will face that previously mentioned slate of tough opponents without him at the start of the season. He was 4-4 with a 3.18 ERA and 40 strikeouts in 45 1/3 innings as a freshman last year. His 10 starts trailed only the 15 made by Norton and former ace Will Hudgins (drafted last year by the Washington Nationals).

Trey Mancini (.317, 12 HR, 45 RBIs, .940 OPS) and Jagielo (.310, 13 HR, 43 RBIs, .945 OPS) will anchor the lineup and the infield at first and third base, respectively. Most of the everyday lineup is taken care of as well. Co-captain Frank DeSico is back at second base, while either sophomore Jason McMurray or freshman Lane Richards will be at shortstop.

"I think we've gotten to a point where our best players are also some of our hardest workers and invested in winning and losing," Aoki commented. "Whenever you have that I think you have a really good recipe for having some success."