

UC Irvine

a Program Just Out of its Infancy Stands Among the Elite



Editorial and photos submitted by Fumi Kimura-UC Irvine Athletics

Photo by Scott Roeder

In 2010, UC Irvine is expected to be among the top 10 programs in the nation. Led by a veteran group of players, the Anteaters return 17 letterwinners, including nine starting position players - seven of whom hit .290 or better last season. In a college baseball rarity, four all-conference honorees return to the diamond. Senior Francis Larson returns to his starting position behind the plate. The team's RBI leader with 43, Larson batted .310 and led the Anteaters with nine home runs. He is joined by sophomore Ronnie Shaeffer who hit .388 as the team's designated hitter and had 36 RBI en route to a second-team accolade. Senior infielder Casey Stevenson boasted a .346 average with 41 RBI and 19 doubles to capture all-conference second-team honors while Tommy Reyes was tabbed honorable mention after a stellar freshman campaign in which he hit .348 with 32 hits. In addition to upperclassmen Larson and Stevenson, UCI returns senior starters Dillon Bell, Jeff Cusick, Sean Madigan and Cory Olson who promise to provide valuable leadership in addition to their contributions on the field. The team will boast a polished pitching staff with three starters who combined for just four losses in 2009. Leading the group is the 2009 Big West

Pitcher of the Year, senior Daniel Bibona, who was the second consecutive Anteater to collect the conference's top pitching honor. The three-time All-American was 12-1 and undefeated in league contests at 7-0. Senior Christian Bergman was 9-3 and earned all-conference second-team honors while junior Crosby Slaughter was unbeaten at 8-0. The team will also turn to one of the top closers in the country in senior Eric Pettis who locked down 17 saves to finish third in the nation and pick up two All-America honors.

Although the season is still a month away, the national preseason recognition is a result of what has been a determined and meteoric rise for the Anteater program. Impacted by state budget cuts, UCI terminated a successful and competitive program in 1992. In May of 1999, a successful campaign spearheaded by five UCI student-athletes resulted in the passing of a student referendum that would enable the Anteaters to bring back baseball as well as institute a women's golf program, women's indoor track and women's water polo. As part of a unique start-up opportunity, Dan Guerrero, UCI's Director of Athletics from 1992-2002, hired John Savage, who had been USC's assistant coach and recruiting coordinator under then head coach Mike Gillespie.

"I was an assistant for Mike on the 2000 USA National Team," said Savage. "I got a call from Dan regarding the position at UCI. I



John Savage

was able to break away and flew back to Orange County and had the opportunity to meet with Dan. The biggest attraction was the school, the location and the conference and certainly Dan and his vision for what goes into developing and forming a D-I program. After meeting with him, it became apparent that this was going to be an elite job and a job that would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to bring back baseball after a 10-year break.”

Savage was hired in the summer of 2000, more than a year before the Anteaters were expected to take the field and went to work on recruiting, setting the schedule and contributing to the design of the diamond in addition to handling the minutiae of day-to-day operations. Removed from its Division II accomplishments – UCI won two national

titles in the early '70's and reached the postseason five times under former head coach Gary Adams – the program lacked a connection with its past and was not a recognized name in Orange County, long considered a hotbed for baseball talent.

“It was a three-man show,” said Savage. “[Former assistant coaches] Pat Shine, Jason Gill and myself going around to games and conducting home visits. I remember taking three or four big drawings of the ballpark and putting them in the trunk and heading off to recruits' homes. That's a memory that will stay with me. It was a lot of hard work and one of the best experiences – a lot of brain-storming on the ballpark, the thought of what your roster would look like, how you're going to attack the schedule. The three of us have a special bond because of that. We were there from Day One. Dan Guerrero and Paul Hope (Associate A.D./Director of Facilities) were the architects of the program and we hit the ground running and took it from there.”

Highly motivated and excited about the upcoming season, the staff hit the recruiting trail hard and armed with the eighth-best recruiting class in the country (Baseball America), the Anteaters faced San Diego on January 25, 2001 to fanfare and a palpable excitement. The standing-room only crowd at newly-constructed Anteater Ballpark was filled with past players, fans, scouts and media members and the continual buzz of excited chatter that had begun at batting practice grew louder as the first pitch neared.

“I remember going around with the umpires and over the ground rules of the park,” said Savage. “I had typed them up that day. I remember that first pitch from [starter] Paul French and he threw it for a strike and the place erupted. The kids were so excited. They were in uniform and we announced both teams along the foul lines. We had waited a long time to develop the program and baseball was finally back at UCI. The scoreboard, the seats, the dugout, field and lights – it was a sellout. San Diego was a regional team at the time. It was a hard-fought game. We ended up losing but right away, we knew we were going to be competitive. Opening Night is unmatched when it comes to my baseball memories. The Mizuno cleats, the hats, the uniforms. We had a mix of freshmen and junior college players.

[Pitcher] Sean Tracey, French, [catcher] Chris Miller – that group of guys will always have a special bond.”

In its inaugural season of the new era, the Anteaters went 33-26, recording wins against UCLA, USC and Pepperdine as well as winning series against California, Saint Mary's and BYU. That team surprised national power Long Beach State with a three-game sweep and went on to finish tied for fourth in the lauded Big West Conference with a 14-10 record. The program struggled in 2003 due to injuries, but UCI again garnered attention in 2004, going 34-23-1 with sweeps against No. 25 Baylor, No.13 Arizona and recording a series win against No. 26 California. At the conclusion of the regular season, UC Irvine earned the first NCAA berth in its Division I history.

“2003 was the ‘Year of the Back’,” said Savage. “We had stress fractures between [infielders] Jaime Martinez, Matt Anderson and [designated hitter] R.J. Brown...a ton of injuries, and we felt we had a good team that year. Then '04 hits and we do what we need to do outside of league. We had some really



Dave Serrano

big wins for the program and we felt we were going to be a high seed (UCI was the No. 2 seed at the South Bend Regional). It was just a little new for us. We were plenty good enough and it was the first step up the mountain to where UC Irvine is today. My biggest regret is that I had to tell players we could only take 25. That was so difficult because you are talking about players who went through the same process. Everybody went through the same thing, the growing pains. Everything was so fresh and it was a shame that those guys weren't at Notre Dame. Everyone who built that program should've been there. When you go to a regional in Southern California, you have guys in the stands who are part of the team and they would have experienced and cherished that as well. Hopping on a plane made it difficult and it was tough for both the coaches and players.

The team went 0-2 in regional action but the groundwork had been laid for what was to come next. Shortly after the 2004 season, Savage was hired to take over the reins of the UCLA program. Charged

by Chancellor Ralph Cicerone, a long-time advocate of UCI Athletics, to find an experienced coach who could continue what Savage and his staff had begun, the athletic administration approached Dave Serrano, the assistant coach and recruiting coordinator at nationally recognized Cal State Fullerton.

"When I was an assistant coach at Cal State Fullerton and we competed against UCI," said Serrano, "even though they had just been reborn to college baseball, there was a respect because of their leadership. Also, you could see there was a rebirth in the commitment the school had in building a first-class, beautiful facility. When I first accepted the job at UCI, I only had one vision and that was to keep the program on the right path with the expecta-



Celebrating UC Irvine's first Regional

tion of playing for championships and getting to Omaha. If I wouldn't have believed that could've happened, I wouldn't have taken the job. I was looking for the right job, not just a head coaching job."

Serrano and his staff proved to be the right fit. Using the 2005 year to transition and institute Serrano's style of play, the Anteaters reached the postseason in 2006, Serrano's second year.

"I wasn't surprised that we captured a berth in the 2006 NCAA playoffs because we had some talent as a team. What I realized after we had gone 0-2 in the Pepperdine regional with two heart-wrenching defeats was that the program wasn't ready yet to take that next step. But it was getting closer."

Serrano's words proved to be prophetic. In 2007, the Anteaters broke through and advanced to Omaha for the first time. UCI posted

47 wins, the first time the 40-win plateau had been touched since 1974. The Anteaters, who had won seven of eight Big West series, went undefeated in regional and super-regional action, handing losses to vaunted programs Texas and Wichita State. Then at Rosenblatt Stadium, UCI staved off elimination twice, defeating cross-county rival Cal State Fullerton and Arizona State in back-to-back, extra-inning affairs. UCI eventually fell to national champion Oregon State in an elimination game but the "upstart Anteaters", as dubbed by ESPN, had taken center stage and announced

their presence in front of a national audience.

"Wow, 2007. What a wonderful memory that is still very close to my heart," said Serrano. "I'll never forget that selection day when UCI's name came up on the screen as the No. 2 team in the Texas regional. My first reaction was that it wasn't going to be easy. Then, what came to my mind was that a team that had been pretty special all year was going to have to do something special to fulfill a dream that we had talked about and worked for from Day One. Our coaches and players along with many of our family members and fans were the only people in America who thought we could live out this dream. If UC Irvine baseball ever wanted to hit it big on the national scene, it was set up for us perfectly. Winning the Texas regional was the first step and then winning the Wichita super regional in such a hostile environment was absolutely the giant leap for the program to where it is today."

With the program enjoying such success, the future looked bright. However, when the University of Oregon decided to re-establish its baseball program in 2007, it set off a chain of events that would leave UCI without a head coach for the second time in six years. Cal State Fullerton's George Horton accepted the task of managing the Ducks and Serrano, the natural heir apparent, was lured back to Titan program. Despite the program's lack of a coaching staff and the ensuing tangle of red tape that would follow in filling the positions, the unusual happened. Instead of the common scenario of players requesting releases to seek opportunities at other institutions, the Anteaters did not. The players, who had bonded so closely throughout the team's magical '07 year, bound themselves even tighter and viewed the coaching vacancy as another obstacle to overcome.

Periodic phone calls to one another assured the team was on the same page and they began conditioning over the summer under the guidance of head strength coach Mike Nagler. When programs around the country took to the field for fall practice, so did the Anteaters. Upperclassmen set the tone, running disciplined practices, going through



drills, and setting up stations as had been done the year before. Punishments were doled out for team infractions, although those were few and far between. With the upperclassmen setting the standard, the younger players quickly fell into line. Meanwhile, UCI's athletic administration turned to respected head coach Mike Gillespie, who had coached the Staten Island Yankees in 2007 after a lauded 20-year career at USC.

"I was coaching at another school when the program was brought back at UCI," said Gillespie. "We played against the 'Eaters twice a year when both John and Dave were head coaches, and I scouted for the Yankees in '07, the year UCI went to the College World Series, seeing them play several times. As a matter of fact, I learned the hard way just how well the UCI teams played under both staffs, as we [USC] took more than our share of losses from them. As a result, I was well-schooled in how strong this program became and how fast they had done it."

The Anteaters' off-season dedication paid off. When the coaching staff finally was installed, it was to a program that was in full swing. The precision and discipline in which the Anteaters ran their drills impressed the coaching staff, giving them a glimpse into the drive that had led the Anteaters to Omaha the year before. In 2008 UCI made its way to a second consecutive postseason, winning the Lincoln regional and advancing to the Baton Rouge super regional. Then in 2009, UCI barreled its way to a first conference title, winning the crown with a 22-2 mark. The Anteaters earned a national No. 1 ranking for six consecutive weeks, and was awarded the honor of hosting a regional for the first time in school history.

While the 2007 season brought unprecedented recognition to the Anteaters, the 2008 and 2009 seasons cemented their reputation as a premiere program. In eight seasons, UCI had progressed to become a program that was routinely mentioned among the country's top teams. It also resulted in a shift in the players' perceptions about themselves. Benefiting from being the "underdog" in 2007, by 2009 the Anteaters had shed the mantle of "up-and-comer" and stood among the most talented collegiate baseball players.

"I think that a culture of winning has been built here," said Gillespie, "and I believe that it is not debatable that the players in the program in each of the last two years inherited the mental toughness and confidence in their ability to compete at the highest level from those who played before them. I do think it's important for our players to know how successfully the '02 team stepped up to compete and hold their own against the best of college baseball that year, getting the ball rolling for what has



again become a program among the nation's elite. It's also clear that Dave Serrano and his staff continued to grow the program and their success in winning a regional at Texas and then the super regional at Wichita State, two hostile environments, has been well-chronicled. I hope no one forgets how tough that was, and their success in Omaha was phenomenal."

"A lot of people had the same vision," said Savage. "We traveled and we played the best. We knew we would have a hard time. I remember our first road trip to Arizona and physically being overmatched. We had 20 or so freshmen but a lot of people at UCI shared the vision and it all worked. The best way for me to put a finger on it [is to say] that a lot of great people were unselfish in their time, had the 'team first' mentality and ultimately we got the program into the right position."

As the season opener nears, expectations will be high for the Anteaters. Poised for another incomparable year with their eyes on college baseball's biggest prize, a proud baseball tradition has once again been established at UC Irvine.

