CABRILLO COLLEGE SOFTBALL PREVIEW

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APTOS — It was the million-dollar question for the Cabrillo College softball team coming into 2014: How do you replace or at least try to replicate — the production and output of Sierra Clark, last season’s Pitcher of the Year in the Coast Conference South who was just as important for the Seahawks in the batter’s box as she was in the circle. Individually speaking, you can’t.

“There’s no replacing Sierra Clark,” Cabrillo coach Kristy Ballinger said Tuesday of the San Lorenzo Valley High product, all-state selection who last season as a sophomore led the CC-S in batting (.477) and RBIs (66), and was third in the conference in earned-run average (1.99) and wins (19).

Collegiately, though, Ballinger believes the Seahawks are a better team this year, with enough weapons in the pitching department and enough power and speed in the lineup to ultimately shrink the production gap that was left by the graduation of Clark and several others.

Cabrillo (9-4), which went 14-11-1 last season and earned the CC-S title for the first time since 1990, will open league play on Thursday against visiting West Valley (9-6) at 3 p.m.

“We should be a better team,” said the third-year Seahawks coach, who last season led the Seahawks to a 22-10 overall record and a spot in the Super Regionals.

“Their offense is a lot more athleticism individually, and they’re fast runners,” Ballinger added. “We’re just trying to get them to learn more of an mental aspect of the game — be mentally tougher and knowing what to do with the ball in all situations.

“But athletically, we’re a lot stronger.”

Cabrillo returned seven players from last season, including five all-CC-S selections in shortstop Emily Pope (Scotts Valley), catcher Valerie Silva (Sequoia), pitcher Shannon Egan (Agate), first baseman Angela Martin (Agate) and centerfielder Annette Bryant (Sequoia).

Bryant trained Clark with a full batting average last season, and will team up this season with fellow sluggers in second baseman Alysia Rodriguez and left fielder Mila Castillo, both from Seaside.

**SOFTBALL**

Continued from B3

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Paced with three power hitters in Martin, second baseman Knowles and San Jose’s Taylor Baty, who in six games last season batted .500 (18 of 36) for Cabrillo before suffering a broken foot, and the Hawks will look to keep opposing pitchers off balance.

Knowles has been a welcomed addition. The right-fielder was planning to attend College of San Mateo this season but saw the Seahawks in the playoffs last year and opted for Cabrillo instead.

Ballinger said Knowles is hard-working and has even provided leadership, despite being a freshman.

Her two home runs — one of which was a grand slam — doesn’t hurt, either.

“It’s a scarily lineup with a mix of power,” said Ballinger, who also expects to utilize the team’s speed on the base paths.

But while Ballinger admittedly expects a lot out of her team, she also acknowledges the Seahawks aren’t there just yet. Consistency in certain areas remains a problem, she said. Martin, who splits time at first base with Harbor High graduate Olivia Mahash, agrees with her coach’s sentiments.

“Our hitting’s been a little off, but we’ve been hitting well in recent games,” said Martin, who this season batted .417 (13 of 31) through eight games.

“We’re getting along better, we’re clicking on all cylinders and the field we’re communicating on,” said Martin, a former Sentinel All-County Player of the Year who is currently batting .400 for the Hawks. “But we’re still trying to figure some things out.”

Errors have reared their ugly head at times on defense, but, most notably, Cabrillo has shown some difficulty of getting runners home. In their first four losses, the Hawks are averaging 10-14 runners left on base, Ballinger said.

“One game’s [14], another game it’s 7-0,” she said. “But if you put it on us, we’re not doing well.”

“For us, it’s just the mental thing. We have good hitters, but we’re not hitting it.”

“Once we get it all together, we’re going to do well. It’s just a matter of when we get it all together.”

The Seahawks have shown signs of improvement. Winners in four of their last five games, the Hawks have recently posted victories over Sacramento City and Scorpion, each of whom garnered top-10 consideration at one point this season by the California Community College Softball Coaches Association’s in the NorCal poll.

And Cabrillo is looking that recent trend continues, became the CC-S is filled with top-10 ranked teams, including No. 4 Stockton, No. 8 Cal State Monterey Peninsula and No. 4 San Jose City, which is currently ranked No. 6 in the state.

Cabrillo is currently unranked, but was a preseason top-10 selection in NorCal.

“It will be tough,” Ballinger said simply.

The coach believes her pitching staff could provide an answer. Through the Hawks will go with three pitchers — each with their own pitching style, Ballinger said. The returning Egan is a finesse pitcher, Sequoel High graduate Taylor Tessier can hit her spots consistently and the hard-throwing Randee Hindman, who played at CSU Stanislaus last season, supplies both movement and speed.

“We have three really strong pitchers and, combined, they can fool some batters,” Ballinger said, who never had three pitchers she can rely on in her eight years total at Cabrillo.