Cabrillo’s Cuellar showcases rare speed on the base paths

By Andrew Matheson
omatheson@santacruzsentinel.com
@amatheson_ on Twitter

APTOS ▶ The one stolen base attempt Ca- brillo College softball player Mikal Cuellar can specifically recall this season is the one that wasn’t a stolen base at all. Her sole statistic in the caught-stealing category occurred during the second game of the season against Monterey Peninsula College.

“I remember that one exactly,” said the fleet-footed freshman. “I did not get off the base as fast as I could have.

“Everything since has literally been a blur for Cuellar.

“It’s border-line ridiculous,” Seahawks

IF YOU GO
NORCAL REGIONAL PLAYOFFS

What: Game 1 in best-of-three series, No. 11 Cabrillo (26-11) at No. 6 San Joaquin Delta (26-12).

When: Saturday, 2 p.m.

Where: San Joaquin Delta College, 5151 Pacific Avenue, Stockton

Cuellar coach Kristy Ballinger said, “I mean, a couple times this year I’ve given her the steal sign and the catcher had a clean catch, a clean throw, and she’s standing up at second, doesn’t even have to slide.”

“So it benefits us. All she has to do is get on base and it’s like a double.”

Or a triple. Named to the all-state softball team by the California Community Col-

Softball

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it comes to stealing bags. The Santa Cruz High alum has 81 stolen bases in 32 attempts this season, tops in the Coast Conference South and fifth-most in California. And along with other former Santa Cruz County prep players Annalise Bryant (17 steals), Alyssa Rodriguez (17) and Emily Payne (16), Cuellar and the Seahawks have combined for 95 stolen bases this season — sixth-most in the state.

Speed like that could make Cabrillo a difficult out when they open the NorCal Regional playoffs Saturday. The No. 11 Seahawks (26-11) — who plan to show team unity by approximately tying matching ribbons to their cleats, almost like the winged shoes of Hermes — will visit No. 6 San Joaquin Delta College (28-12) for Game 1 of their best-of-three series at 2 p.m.

Game 2 will be at noon Sunday, with Game 3 at 2 p.m., if necessary.

Ballinger, who feels her team’s speed will be “buges” this weekend in Stockton, hasn’t always preached a swift style that would yield to such “crazy numbers” on the base paths.

“To be honest with you, we had been having trouble getting bunts down in the beginning of the season, so I pushed the steal a little more,” she said. “And it just kind of developed into, ‘Hey, we can do this more often.’

“With speed to burn out of the batter’s box, Cabrillo has been able to go back to the bunt. In fact, Cuellar compiled a team-best .474 batting average (46 of 97) with the majority of her hits coming on infield singles — mostly bunts.

“As the season progressed, players started to pick up on the fact that she was just going to bunt,” Ballinger said. “So they play in and we’ve been working on locating the bunt and which fielder looks the weakest, and she’s been placing her bunts perfect.

“She’s still beating it out even though they’re playing close.”

Although the consensus is that Cuellar is faster now than she was at the beginning of the season, Ballinger said she hasn’t timed the team in a home-to-home sprint since then. Even so, she can still recall Cuellar’s breakneck pace on her first go around the base paths.

She can recall the second go-round, too. Cuellar was so fast the first time, Ballinger thought she made a mistake in her calculations and made the freshman run again.

“I remember looking at the stopwatch and being like, ‘We need to re-do that.’ Something was wrong because I think it was like 11.2 (seconds) or something,” Ballinger said. “So we re-did it and it was like 11.6 (seconds), but that’s just crazy. She’s consistently keeping her speed from each base under three seconds, and that’s nuts.”

Cuellar isn’t sure where her screaming speed comes from. She says her brothers “aren’t that fast” (her words), while her father, a former track athlete, is fast, but they’ve never raced one another. She hasn’t necessarily tried to build upon her overall speed during the season, either, instead focusing on timing a pitcher’s release while on the base paths.

But Cuellar, who wants to eventually play at a four-year college, plans to increase her speed on the in-field by running on the beach — a tip she got from teammate Bryant, a Soquel High alum.

“You can’t teach speed,” Ballinger said. Cuellar, who swiped a county-best 17 bags during her senior year at Santa Cruz, “but I plan on getting faster and faster.”

In addition, Cuellar, a left-handed slapper, has developed as a hitter this season and recently began showing signs of practice in increased power. Like the rest of the slap-hitters, she is given a green light when she’s on the base path. She has stolen her last 30 bases cleanly and wiped multiple bags in nine games this season, including three stolen bases against Foothill on March 25. She also leads the team with a .519 on-base percentage and is tied for the team lead in hits (40) and runs (34).

“Teams will get the reports on what we do, and they still can’t catch her,” teammate Rodriguez said. “She’s just lightning speed, it’s crazy.”

Rodriguez said Cuellar’s reputation precedes her. Along with drawing the infield in when she’s up to bat, opponents recently began to pitch-out with Cuellar on first. But the added advantage hasn’t changed the inevitable — that Cuellar will safely slide head-first into second base.

After all, she’s fairly motivated not to get caught stealing again this season.

“The one time you get out,” Ballinger said, “you always remember that.”

Contact Andrew Matheson at 831-706-2372.