

They Come to Play

Local High School Baseball Teams Begin Closely-Contested Season



Soquel High's Ryan Battey hopes to help lead his team to its fourth consecutive league title.

by Jim Johnson

If you're among the hosts of baseball fans completely fed up with the contract squabbles currently wracking the major leagues, there's a very simple antidote. If you're tired of watching baseball turned into a game where millionaires battle billionaires over who gets a bigger slice of an overblown money pie, there is an alternative.

Baseball is still being played by athletes appreciative of the game itself, at ballparks where the price of admission won't leave you broke and there's no possibility of a strike.

It's high school baseball and, as local teams begin league play around the county, this could be one of the most competitive seasons in recent Santa Cruz Coast Athletic League history.

"This is easily the strongest the league's been in a long time," Harbor High coach Rod Fleming said. "There are more (potential) front-runners than any year in a long time."

Though Aptos is probably the team with the most returning talent, at least five of the other six SCCAL teams, including Harbor, Monte Vista, San Lorenzo Valley, Soquel and Watsonville, have to be considered possible contenders for the title. Only

Santa Cruz is not expected to be at quite the same level as the rest of the league teams.

Loaded Mariners looking to get tough

With a roster full of experience and talent, Aptos coach Ernie Cooper has spent the pre-league season concentrating on toughening up his team.

After coming back to beat

North Monterey County 6-3 in a pre-league game early this month, Cooper lectured his troops long after the game was over.

"We were very, very sluggish today," Cooper said at the time. "That North Monterey County team came out and scrapped for every run they got and they almost surprised us. That's what I want to do. We've got some pretty good players but we're not a

good team if we don't come together."

Cooper's list of "pretty good players" is as long if not longer than that of any other team in the SCCAL.

It all starts with the best duo in the league this year, seniors Noah Hall and Mike Murphy — both of whom are four-year varsity players. Hall and Murphy form the best one-two starting punch in the league from the pitching mound. And they can hit, too.

Though the tall, lanky Murphy is impressive with the bat, the thickly muscled Hall's slugging has been the stuff of legend. In one game earlier this season, Cooper estimated that one of Hall's shots carried over 400 feet. Hall piled up 13 RBIs in his first eight games this season.

Hall and Murphy are complimented by several other senior players including outfielders Jake Gregoire and Nate Evans, and pitcher Bogey Petty. In addition, juniors like catcher Jason Wolfe, infielders Derek Fischer and Ryan Rojas, and pitchers Brian Rice and Brendan Hurley add depth.

"We already knew our first four to five players in the lineup could hit the ball," Cooper said. "But actually our pitching has been very good, too. We have five guys we can throw out there

at any time."

A year ago, Aptos finished second in the SCCAL with a lineup which relied largely on juniors and sophomores. This year, with a more experienced roster, if the Mariners are as hungry for the league title as Cooper would like for them to be, Aptos will be tough to beat.

Pirates harboring great expectations

Harbor boasts perhaps the SCCAL's strongest outfield. Led by seniors Tony Alvarez and Andy Brenkwitz, and junior Jake Fleming, the Pirate outfield has Coach Fleming raving about his team's defense.

"They all have great speed and great arms," Fleming said.

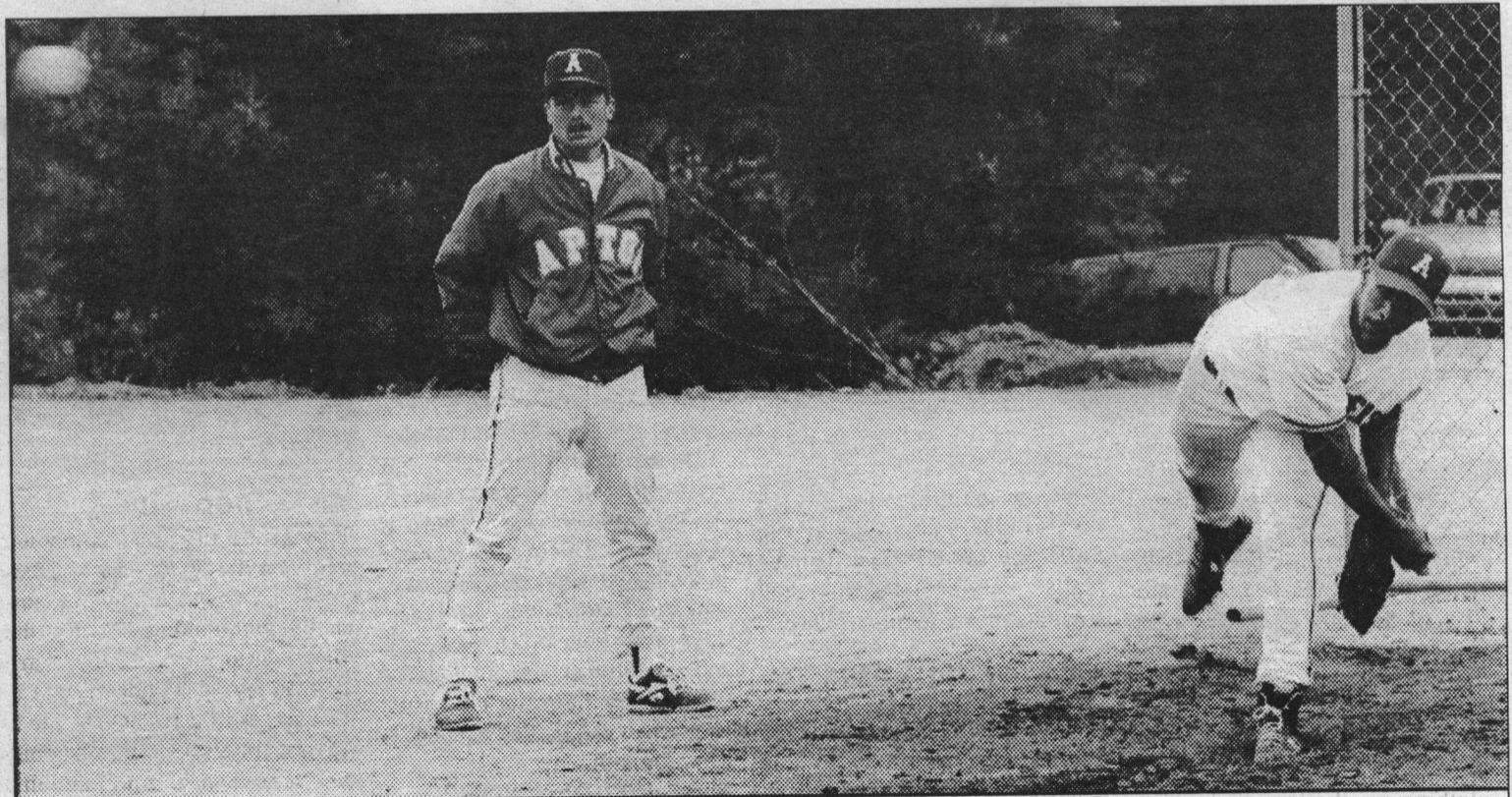
Fleming is also enthusiastic about his pitching staff, which includes seniors Ryan Pinkham and Jason Trotter, and juniors Paul Kenville and Mike Raffo, with Alvarez seeing action on the hill as well.

That, Fleming said, leaves it up to the offense.

"If our bats are moving, we'll do well," Fleming said.

Harbor will count on senior catcher Anthony Chavez to provide power in the lineup.

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Aptos High coach Ernie Cooper (L) has big plans for senior star Noah Hall and the rest of the Mariners.

Baseball

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Last year, Harbor finished the season on an up note, rebounding from a slow start to finish third in the SCCAL.

Mustangs still young but may challenge

Monte Vista Christian head coach Don Sturtevant will rely heavily on a roster full of juniors, nine to be exact.

But many of those underclassmen have extensive varsity experience, such as shortstop Martin Pack, and pitchers Cesar Gutierrez and Mark Heffernan.

Seniors Bill Sturtevant, a catcher, and Andreas Guerrero, a second baseman, will be counted on for leadership.

"We maybe don't have as much depth as some other teams but I think it's a pretty solid group," Sturtevant said. "We have quite a few returning players. The program has been building."

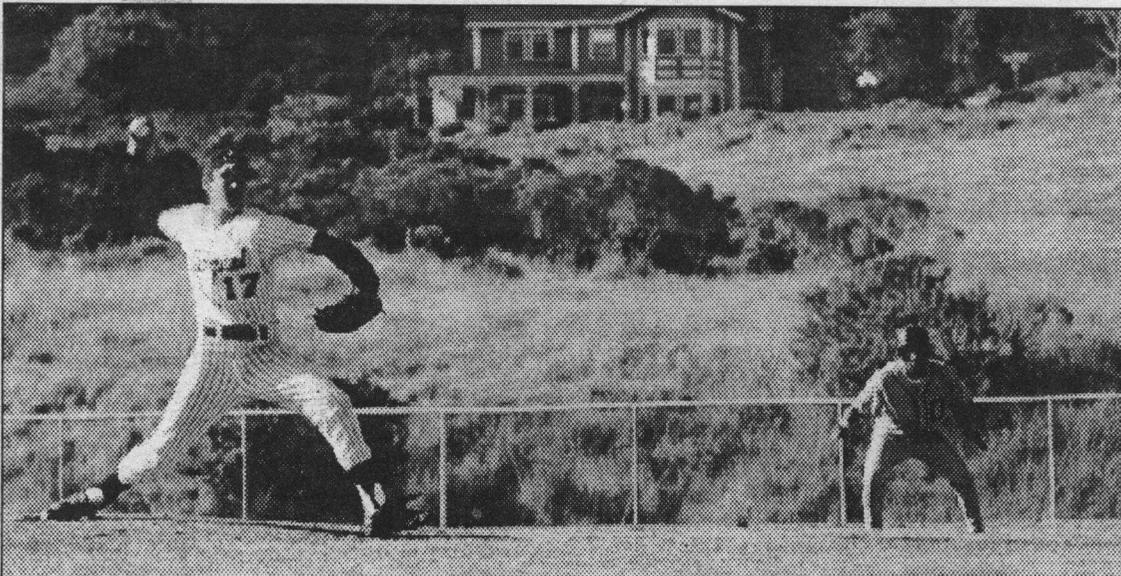
Monte Vista finished tied for fourth in the SCCAL last year.

Cougars counting on team unity

San Lorenzo Valley enjoyed a solid pre-league winning streak which helped solidify the team, coach Will Guilford said.

"We're all having a good time and jelling as a team," Guilford said.

A major reason for the Cougars' early success was the pitching staff. Behind junior starters Evan Rust and Matt Van



Local high school baseball features a plethora of young dedicated athletes...

Dusen, and senior closer Robin Guiver, SLV could shut down a few offenses this season.

"We have some depth in the pitching staff even though we don't have any one guy that you say, 'Oh, yeah, he's their big ace,'" Guilford said.

On offense, seniors Sean Murawsky, Matt Crocker and Derek Cahill will contribute, as will junior Danny Mix and sophomore speedster Justin Manson, who Guilford said led the SCCAL in stolen bases after being called up from the junior varsity last year.

Traditionally a title contender in recent years, SLV slumped into fourth place in the SCCAL last year but is looking to rebound, Guilford said.

"I think we're going to be right in there," Guilford said. "I think we're a dark horse."

Cardinals rely on talented core

First-year coach Mark Hodges is looking for his team to rally around his core of senior players including outfielder/catcher George Arnott, outfielder Gino Marini, third baseman Ryan Doan and pitcher Dylan Harley.

"They are the anchor of the team," Hodges said. "The key will be how well the team responds to what we want them to do."

According to Hodges, Arnott's experience as a four-year varsity player will be key. He added that the team is counting on Marini's speed, Doan's athletic skill and Harley's ability to throw a lot of innings.

Hodges, who played for legendary Santa Cruz coach Bill Dodge in the early '80s, returned to Santa Cruz after coaching in Redondo Beach for five years.

Last year, Santa Cruz finished in sixth place in the SCCAL.

Veteran coach back at Soquel

Long-time Soquel coach Mitch Meyer is back with the Knights after spending three seasons guiding the Cabrillo College baseball program. Meyer takes over for former coach Dennis Thomas, who guided the Knights to the last three league titles before being let go after last season.

Meyer said he is pleased that the players have so willingly accepted the change in leadership.

"It will be a tremendous change," Meyer said. "There's obviously a difference in coaching styles. I am a very regimented-type person as a coach. What I am very pleased with right now is we have a 100 percent buy-in to what we're trying to do."

Meyer must deal with the loss of three key players from last year's SCCAL championship squad in catcher Giuseppe Chiaramonte, and

pitchers Matt McGrath and Chris Weaver.

With the pitching staff thusly gutted, Meyer will turn to several hurlers to fill the gap including Joel Sigala, Tony Burks and Chris Roberts.

"We'll be using sophomores and freshmen," Meyer said. "Our mound core will be very young."

Soquel will have some experience on offense and in the field as senior outfielders Ryan Battey and Josh Silva, as well as senior shortstop Bo Hart, senior third baseman Jake Brazil and senior first baseman Ray Knight return.

Wildcats expecting big comeback

After dropping to the bottom of the SCCAL standings a year ago, the traditionally strong Watsonville program is on the rebound, coach Bob Bivins said.

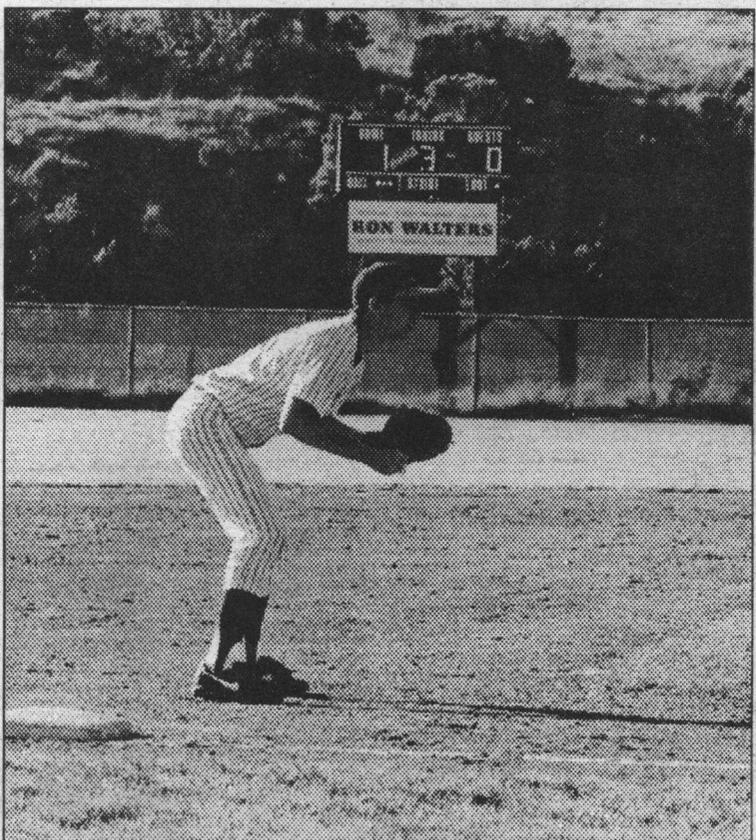
"We're pleased so far (this season)," Bivins said. "We're playing a good caliber of ball. The pitching seems to be coming around. I think our defense is very sound. If we can hit the ball better, we have as good a chance as anyone."

Watsonville will rely on an experienced roster which includes seniors Ken Espinosa, pitcher/infielder; Eric Gouker, pitcher/outfielder; John Carrera, catcher; Alex Flores, infielder; Daniel Rodriguez, pitcher; and Adrian Cordova, pitcher/outfielder.

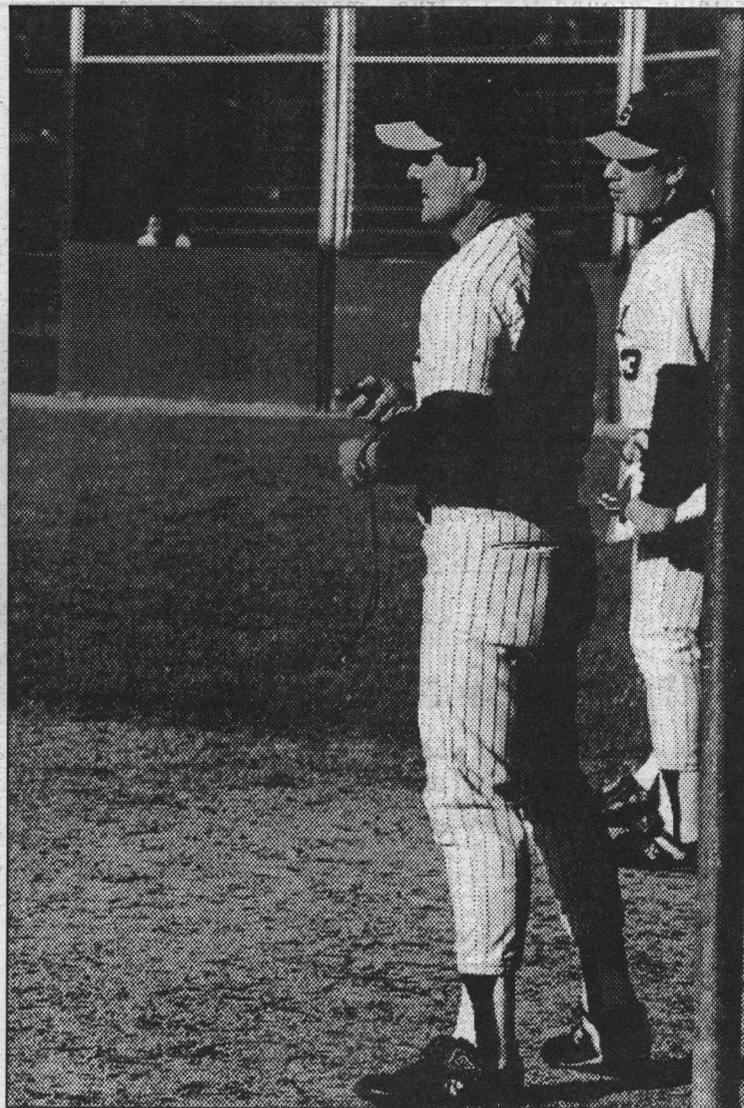
Bivins also has former Soquel coach Thomas as an assistant coach this year. Bivins said Thomas has helped instill a new attitude in this year's team.

Last year, Bivins said Watsonville lost eight one-run games in SCCAL play, and he's counting on a more experienced squad to win the close ones this season.

"We looked at last year as a learning experience," Bivins said. □



... who are ready to battle for the league championship.



Veteran coach Mitch Meyer returns to lead Soquel after a three-year absence.