

Venice Aims For Florida Three-Peat

by Clint Longenecker (Baseball America)

Led by alums and lifelong friends Craig Faulkner and Mark Guthrie, the Venice (Fla.) High program has created a structure for sustained success.

But this season could be special even by the Indians' lofty standards, as they return the core of a team that has won consecutive 7-A Florida state championships and enter the season as the No. 1 team in the Baseball America/National High School Baseball Coaches Association Top 25.

Faulkner, the head coach, and Guthrie, an assistant and former big leaguer, forged their relationship in Little League when Faulkner caught Guthrie. Their years together in baseball helped shape the way the Venice program is run.

"Mark and I have been best friends since back in Little League, and we played through high school at Venice," Faulkner said. "He is a knowledgeable baseball guy, and we complement each other. He sees the game through pitcher's eyes and I see through catcher's eyes."

The duo walked on at Louisiana State during the first year of Skip Bertman's tenure and played on Bertman's first two College World Series teams. Under Bertman, who won five national titles, they learned how to build the foundation of a successful program.

"Most of the coaching things we have learned have all come from Skip," Guthrie said. "It's a program that probably wouldn't work in pro ball. It's different. When you can get kids that are learning the game to buy into learning the system, it creates smarter players. It's based on attention to detail."

Faulkner played in the minors for eight seasons before coaching in the upper minors. He returned to coach Venice in 1999.

"Skip taught us how to build a program from the ground up," Faulkner said. "We wanted to have more ways to win, and that comes through preparation. His big thing was he wanted to turn every small percentage of winning games in our favor. That is what we strive for here."

Those characteristics became hallmarks of the Venice brand of baseball, which is noted for its attention to detail.

"They do a heck of job of executing on both sides of the ball," an American League scout said. "They're always prepared and never beat themselves. They're going to put pressure on you, capitalize on every error you make and make you beat them."

Entering Faulkner's second season, Venice built a new ballpark modeled on minor league dimensions, with an outfield wall more than 10 feet high. This run-suppressing ballpark helped drive the way Venice's teams were built, with an emphasis on pitching, fundamentally sound defense and speed.

"Our field is very difficult to hit in, especially at night," Guthrie said. "It's almost like a Candlestick Park effect, where it is very damp and the ball doesn't carry."

Venice offenses are built on making contact and getting on base. Over the last two championship seasons, the Indians have hit five home runs total. Venice walked (11 percent of plate appearances) nearly as much as it struck out (12 percent) in 2013.

Guthrie, who pitched 15 years in the majors, joined Venice as pitching coach in 2009, two seasons after the Indians won the state title in 2007. Venice's pitching staffs are known for their ability to pound the strike zone and limit walks. They have combined to average fewer than two walks per seven innings, with more than a strikeout an inning over the last two seasons.

“Our strength is that we don’t walk guys on the mound and we don’t strike out offensively,” Guthrie said. “We have a goal for every game. We try to keep our combined number of walks allowed and strikeouts offensively fewer than four or five. We can usually win when we do that.”

The Venice program has also developed another way to cultivate this brand of baseball and develop players. In 2012, Faulkner and Guthrie started a travel program, the Florida Burn.

“We wanted to keep our kids together so that we could teach them in the summer,” Guthrie said. “We could continue to make sure that they didn’t get overused.”

Many of the Indians play for the Burn, which has expanded to age groups below high school level to build a developmental pipeline and help players gain exposure to colleges.

“Anytime you can keep high school players under the same philosophies in this era with the same coaches and teammates it is huge because everybody has different philosophies in travel ball,” the scout said.

In some ways, the program is a throwback to the American Legion era, before travel ball became pervasive and high school-aged players would play for the local legion post. But now the travel ball circuit gives the Burn a chance to compete on a national level with their talent. Burn teams have fared well, winning numerous Perfect Game tournaments and placing second in the 85-team World Wood Bat Championship in Jupiter, Fla., last October, losing the title game by one run.

“The continuity is huge,” catcher Michael Rivera said. “You look at other teams that we play and they don’t know their own teammates, which is kind of sad. We can use strategies and plays because we know each other, which nobody works on because most people just show up and play.”

Venice returns five starters and its own “core four” seniors who have been the foundation of the last two teams: Rivera, shortstop Dalton Guthrie (Mark’s son), righthander/outfielder Brandon Elmy and the versatile Ryan Miller.

Rivera and Guthrie have started at catcher and shortstop since they were freshmen. Rivera was a second team All-American last year, hitting .528/.611/.820.

“Rivera is the best high school hitter I’ve ever seen,” Guthrie said. “As far as production, he is the best and the most consistent. He is always hitting and driving in runs.”

The Florida commit made the all-tournament team at the World Cup last summer, as he played third base for USA Baseball’s 18-and-under team that won the gold medal. Last spring, he threw out 80 percent of base-stealers, which allowed the Indians to steal nearly seven times (69) more bases than they allowed (10).

Guthrie is a lean, athletic shortstop with defensive chops and instincts. “He has tremendous instincts, he has great hands and feet but his mind really separates him,” Faulkner said. “He truly captains the infield.”

The surehanded Florida commit has soft hands and arm strength to go with good lateral quickness. He has a quick stroke and hit .298/.368/.365 with 15 steals last year.

Elmy, who started and won Venice’s last two state championship games, will anchor the rotation, play the outfield and hit cleanup. The Furman commit has a high-80s fastball that has touched 91 mph, a slider and changeup. He posted a 3:1 strikeout-walk ratio and hit .297/.381/.396 with just six strikeouts in 105 plate appearances last season.

Miller will play center field, catcher and pitch. The wiry Florida Atlantic commit has a strong arm and has produced pop times less than 1.9 seconds behind the plate. He has touched the low 90s on the mound.

The key for this year's team will be integrating new arms into bigger roles on a pitching staff that lost three key arms, including third team All-American Cooper Hammond.

Hammond was a sidearmer, and Venice has shown the ability to develop unconventional pitchers. This year's top candidate is junior Kade Hunkapiller, a lefthanded knuckleballer. Junior righthanders Colin Cristello and the 6-foot-7 Cole Kragel will provide key depth, as will Guthrie and Rivera.

The lineup will be augmented by speedy junior outfielder Josh Evans.

To win its third straight state championship, Venice will have to get through another tough schedule that includes a return to the National High School Invitational. But it's not all about winning on the field. Venice also won the state GPA title in two of those years, and many of the teammates have gone on mission trips together to the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica and Panama.

"We want to make a difference in each kid and develop quality young men; winning has been a byproduct," Faulkner said.