



2017 Big West Baseball



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2017 Preseason Big West Coaches Poll - Thursday, February 1, 2017

Titans Tabbed Team To Beat

Irvine, Calif. — The team to beat in the Big West Conference in 2017 is Cal State Fullerton, according to the nine conference coaches that voted on the 2017 Big West baseball pre-season poll. The Titans earned eight first-place votes en route to a total of 75 points while Long Beach State and UC Santa Barbara are knotted in second place with 65 points apiece.

In 2016, head coach Rick Vanderhook led the Titans to their 21st Big West Conference title and 29th conference championship overall with a 17-7 league record. It also marked the Titans' fourth conference title in his five years as head coach. With the conference title, Fullerton earned the automatic qualifier into its 38th NCAA Tournament in 42 seasons at the NCAA Division I level. It was the Titans' 25th straight postseason berth, the third longest active streak behind Miami (44) and Florida State (39).

In addition to the 21 returners from a year ago, Fullerton welcomes back four all-conference performers in sophomore Colton Eastman (RHP), senior Timmy Richards (INF), junior Connor Seabold (RHP) and junior John Gavin (LHP). Eastman, enters the 2017 campaign primed for another big season after dominating the mound as a freshman, compiling an 8-3 record to go along with a 2.24 ERA with a freshman school-record equalling 100 strikeouts in 100.2 innings pitched. He racked up numerous honors last season, as he was named Freshman All-American, the Louisville Slugger Freshman Pitcher of the Year and Big West Freshman Pitcher of the Year.

Richards led the team with nine home runs during the regular season and batted .280 in 55 games for Fullerton. He led the team with 22 extra-base hits including 12 doubles. He was second on the team with a .468 slugging percentage as well as runs scored (38), stolen bases (10) and RBIs (31). In 2016, Seabold went 7-6 in 13 starts despite starting the season coming out of the bullpen. He made 16 appearances overall and posted a 2.48 ERA. He finished second on the team with 96 strikeouts and issued just nine walks in 83 and 1/3 innings pitched. His 10.67 strikeout-to-walk ratio ranked second in the nation. Gavin made 14 starts and had 18 appearances overall. He went 6-3 with a 2.09 ERA and also recorded his first career save. He struck out 60 batters in 86 innings.

They will be joined by a recruiting class that ranked 21st in the nation according to *Collegiate Baseball*, which includes six pitchers, four infielders, one outfielder and one catcher. The Titans enter the 2017 season ranked in every national preseason poll, with Collegiate Baseball awarding Cal State Fullerton with the highest ranking of 10th. This is the Titans' highest placing in the poll since being ranked No. 1 in the 2014 preseason poll.

Like Cal State Fullerton, Long Beach State enters the new year ranked in several national polls, with its highest ranking of 17th from *Collegiate Baseball*. A season ago, LBSU made its 21st postseason trip, and second in three years, after finished second in the Big West Conference with a 15-9 mark. Leading the veteran team is 2016 Big West Pitcher of the Year Darren McCaughan, who led the league and ranked 24th in the nation with a 2.03 ERA. The junior captured his 10th victory of the 2016 season in his final regular season outing to become the first 10-game winner for Long Beach State since Cesar Ramos won 10 games back in 2005.

Along with McCaughan, a pair of 2016 All-Big West First Teamers also return to the lineup in catcher David Banuelos and designated hitter Luke Rasmussen. Behind the plate, Banuelos allowed just six passed balls and stopped 19 of the 30 steal attempts against him. On offense, the junior batted .299 and scored 15 runs, while driving in 26 more. Rasmussen led the Beach and finished third in the conference in RBI with 46, while registering a .305 batting average. He also scored 35 runs and blasted five home runs last season. Long Beach State also has an arsenal of experienced bats returning to make the team that can contend for its first conference title since sharing the title with Cal State Fullerton in 2008.

UC Santa Barbara is coming off a historic year where the Gauchos advanced to their first College World Series ever, knocking off the No. 2 and No. 3 national seeds during their postseason run. They finished the year with a 43-20-1 overall mark and 13-11 conference mark to place third. UCSB ended up going 6-2 in the postseason, including a 3-0 mark in the Nashville Regional at Vanderbilt and a 2-0 record in the Louisville Super Regional. Looking to continue to build on last year's success the Gauchos will have to fill a void with the loss of starting pitcher Shane Bieber, who paced the Big West and tied for fifth in the nation with 12 victories, a first for a Gaucho since 1983. The third-winningest pitcher in UCSB history pitched 134.2 innings and struck out 109 batters to rank second in the conference.

This year the Gauchos will be led by junior left-handed pitcher Kyle Nelson and junior shortstop Clay Fisher, who both picked up preseason All-America accolades. As the team's closer this past season, Nelson went 7-2 with a 2.18 ERA and 10 saves, becoming just the fourth Gaucho ever to reach double digits in saves in a single season. The 6-1 southpaw burst onto the scene as a freshman in 2015, notching a 0.75 ERA in a team-high 25 outings. Fisher has proven himself to be one of the nation's premier defenders, making highlight-reel plays with regularity while displaying advanced range and arm strength. He belted .285/.332/.377 including a solid .353 batting average in the 2016 postseason. He was arguably the top player in the Nashville Regional, as he went 7-15 (.467) with four extra-base hits and seven RBIs en route to All-Regional honors. Other key returners include Austin Bush, JJ Muno, Sam Cohen and Noah Davis.

UC Santa Barbara also welcomes the ninth-best recruiting class in the country, according to *Collegiate Baseball*, which is the highest national ranking in program history. Included in the talent-laden group are three players who were selected in the 2016 MLB First-Year Player Draft - Chris Lincoln, Infielder Armani Smith and southpaw Ben Brecht.

The Mustangs of Cal Poly secured 55 points to lock down the fourth slot. UC Irvine, who collected the final first place vote finished fifth with 48 points. CSUN clinched the sixth spot with 33 points while UC Riverside ranked seventh with 27 points. Hawai'i sits eighth with 23 points and is followed by UC Davis (13).

2017 Coaches Poll Results

1.	Cal State Fullerton (8)	76
T2.	Long Beach State	65
T2.	UC Santa Barbara	65
4.	Cal Poly	55
5.	UC Irvine (1)	48
6.	CSUN	33
7.	UC Riverside	27
8.	Hawai'i	23
9.	UC Davis	13

() First-place vote

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