



2018 Big West Baseball



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Preseason Big West Coaches Poll - Wednesday, January 31, 2018

Titans Favorite To Win 2018 Big West Title

Irvine, Calif. — The Cal State Fullerton Titans have been selected to claim the 2018 Big West Conference Baseball Championship, according to the nine conference coaches that voted on the Big West baseball preseason poll. The Titans earned six first-place votes en route to a total of 73 points. Defending Big West Champion Long Beach State sits second with two-first place votes and 65 total points and Cal Poly is one point back after collecting 64 points to hold the third slot.

The Titans, led by seven-year head coach Rick Vanderhook, enter the 2018 season ranked in every national poll, with their highest ranking of 11th being handed out by both *Baseball America* and *USA Today Coaches Top 25* polls. Cal State Fullerton is the second-highest west coast team in the polls only behind Oregon State, who is ranked as high as No. 2. Fullerton is the lone Big West team to be placed in the poll.

A season ago, Cal State Fullerton, who finished third in league with a 15-9 mark, made an impressive run in the postseason and concluded the year making its 18th trip to the College World Series and its second in the last three seasons. The Titans return a good mix of veterans from that Omaha-bound team, along with talented newcomers, who should help CSF contend for its 22nd Big West Conference title and 30th conference championship overall. Cal State Fullerton welcomes back two All-Big West performers from a year ago in sophomore Sahid Valenzuela and junior Brett Conine. Valenzuela was second on the team with a .314 batting average and 70 hits while Conine made 31 appearances on the mound and earned a league-leading 15 saves. The Titan closer has been recognized in several 2018 preseason All-America lists.

Long Beach State is coming off a year that witnessed the Dirtbags capturing their ninth conference title, first since 2008, after tallying a 20-4 league record and making its 22nd postseason trip for Long Beach State and the third NCAA Regional appearance in four seasons. They were also one win away from a trip to the College World Series. The Dirtbags finished the season as a consensus Top 10 team in the nation for the first time since 1998.

The Dirtbags return three 2017 All-Big West selections in second-teamers Chris Rivera and Jarren Duran and honorable mention member Laine Huffman. Rivera finished second in the Big West with 13 saves and sported a 2.60 earned run average. While Long Beach State welcomes back its clutch closer, it has a few holes to fill in the pitching staff as it lost two of its three pitchers from its weekend rotation which spear-headed a league-leading 3.09 ERA.

They do bring back a catalyst on offense in Duran, as he paced LBSU and ranked third in the league with 47 runs scored, hit .308 and stole a league-best 19 bases. Joining Duran is fellow all-conference member Huffman, who finished last year fourth on the team after hitting .294, along with driving in 26 runs and scoring 22 of his own. The duo are joined by a dozen newcomers which feature a mix of five junior college transfers and seven incoming freshmen, and it's tied with the 2014 signing class as the largest of Buckley's tenure with the Dirtbags.

The Mustangs are coming off a momentum-building end to the 2017 campaign, overcoming a 2-9 start by capturing seven of eight Big West series en route to a second-place conference finish. Cal Poly has finished in the top four of the Big West standings 13 times in head coach Larry Lee's previous 15 seasons with the Mustangs.

Cal Poly welcomes back 19 letter winners, including eight position players who made 25 or more starts in 2017, and nine pitchers, six of whom pitched 25 or more innings. In addition, pitchers Jarred Zill and Thomas Triantos, both of whom underwent Tommy John surgery a year ago, are back and the Mustang coaching staff also has 13 newcomers to add to the mix, including two freshman infielders who likely will be in the starting lineup on Opening Day and as many as six first-year pitchers who are high on the preseason depth chart.

UC Santa Barbara, who showcases the 21st-best recruiting class in the country, according to *DI Baseball*, sits fourth with 49 points and is closely followed by CSUN and its 48 points. The Anteaters of UC Irvine, who earned one first-place vote and a total of 43 owns the sixth slot, while Hawai'i (27) clinched the seventh slot. UC Riverside ranked eighth (26) and UC Davis (10) rounded out the nine-team field.

2018 Coaches Poll Results

1. Cal State Fullerton - 73 (6)
2. Long Beach State - 65 (2)
3. Cal Poly - 64
4. UC Santa Barbara - 49
5. CSUN - 48
6. UC Irvine - 43 (1)
7. Hawai'i - 27
8. UC Riverside - 26
9. UC Davis - 10

() First-place vote

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