

Axe need to be sharp to go deep in State

South Eugene 2006 regular season review and State Playoff Preview

May 13th, 2006

Looking at the recently completed 2006 **South Eugene Axemen** Midwestern League season, what jumps out to this analyst (and in service of transparency, father of a senior starter) is how close this team was to being 13-2 and vying for the league title. Home team hyperbole? I think not.

Overall Summary: Of South' five losses (the sixth I discount as it was a meaningless game with a *Kidsports lineup*), three were well within the Axemen's grasp and arguably, four of the five were games South "lost" rather than their opponents "won". This is an excellent, perhaps under appreciated baseball team. From top to bottom, it's one of the most consistent hitting teams in the league. South's offense, their pitching and defense were respectable all season long and at times outstanding. Their biggest weakness (which could sink them come playoff time) was their play on the bases, which at times was inexplicably poor. There may not be a statistic for runners thrown out on the bases but if there is, South might lead the league. The high points of the season have to be the sweep of North and the home win over league champion Churchill; the low points the losses at Lebanon, Willamette (a particular ouch) and Sheldon. In their 3-1 record vs. North and Churchill South combined solid pitching, exceptional defense and timely hitting, the standard recipe of any winning team.

Pitching /Defense:

Across the diamond South fields an exceptionally talented defensive team. The infield is anchored by senior shortstop Nate Wilson-Traisman and first baseman Aaron Pratt. Wilson-Traisman moved from third base to shortstop last summer. His height and reach allow him great range, and he turns the double play as well as anyone. As a first year shortstop he played solid all year long. Midwestern league coaches will have a hard time deciding between Wilson-Traisman and Churchill's Josh Hogan for first team all-league. Pratt became a veritable vacuum cleaner at first base, making yoga like stretches and scoops virtually every game. The loss of Jack Carpenter over the season's first half gave an opportunity to sophomore hitting machine Evan Brown. Young Brown struggled at times in the field but gamely played wherever, he was asked to play. When Carpenter returned to second base South improved their outfield defense by moving sophomore Ethan Trachtenberg from third base to right field (a shrewd move that paid big dividends). Brown took over at third, keeping his hot bat in the lineup, though the ball seemed to keep finding him. His best defensive game of the year arguably saved the Churchill win showing that when focused, he can make the play's he needs to make. Carpenter is as solid as any second baseman in the league, his return coincided with South's late run, winning five of six in the season's second half to secure a playoff spot. Stellar junior catcher Ben Kiese is also a candidate for first team all-league, as good a backstop as in the Midwestern League. The outfield is all-star caliber, and as good as any South team in memory. In Left field junior Sam Holman has played flawless defense all year. Sophomore Right fielder Ethan Trachtenberg shows great natural instincts shifting from infield to outfield in mid-season, and Center fielder Travis Rooke-Ley brings to mind the oft-quoted saying from the late 1970's when Gary Maddux roamed center field for San Francisco and later Philadelphia "...two thirds of the earth is covered by water,

*the other third is covered by*_____yes, you can insert Travis Rooke-Ley's name here. From left to right all are extremely athletic and instinctive with the ability to throw runners out at any base, anytime, from all fields. All will be returning next season, and if the alignment keeps, South pitchers will have the strongest defensive outfield in the Midwestern league behind them.

On the bump, Senior Michael Ward stands tall as one of state's top five pitchers. Every time he takes the ball is South's best chance to win. And South believes they are capable of winning every time Ward throws—evidenced in part by their road win in South Salem in last years state playoffs when Ward threw an eight inning 135 pitch complete game (after Dan White's extra inning HR gave South the lead). With pitching coach Mark Hills moving to Lane Community College this year it took Ward some time to adjust to his new pitching coach, Matt Chapman. Two wins over North, and a win over Churchill and Ward is peeking at the right time. Travis Rooke-Ley is a solid #2 and Dan O'Brien #2a. (or vice versa). Rooke-Ley has that lefty "what me worry?" mentality. O'Brien has great stuff though struggles at time when things start to go against him. If placed in the right situation, O'Brien is lights out. He may be most effective as the second option in combination with Rooke-Ley starting. Wilson-Traisman's sidewinder delivery can be an effective change of pace in short stints, though he hasn't been called on in the second half of the season and may be too rusty for anything more than a spot batter or two in post-season. South's pitching is solid and deep. South's playoff success may rest on their coach's ability to intelligently cobble together a creative pitching rotation—maximizing the use of Ace Ward and spotting the others to give Ward the rest he needs to pitch as often as he can.

Offense

South's batters are fearless and they've hit all year long. Beginning with Kiese's three run blast at Swede in the league opener South has consistently pounded the ball throughout the season. Wilson-Traisman finished among the league leaders in HR's (tied for league lead) and RBI's (second behind Sheldon's Besaw) hovering just above .400 all season long. Trachtenberg and Rooke-Ley live on the bases, with Trachtenberg one of the leagues hottest hitters in the second half of the season. Kiese, Brown, Holman and Pratt are slash and gap hitters and Carpenter a half season behind his teammates, is just hitting his stride (hitting the RF wall at Civic in the playoff clinching victory over Lebanon). South has hit anyone and everyone all year long.

Coaching/Intangibles:

In his fifth year as head coach, South alum Cole Nagler has accomplished what no South Eugene baseball coach has accomplished in forty-five years, namely take his team to the state playoffs in consecutive years. There is no bigger cheerleader for South Eugene baseball than Nagler, one of the leagues all-around good guys. With only two senior starters, Wilson-Traisman and Pratt, the present, as well as the future looks bright. Nagler has done well in nurturing his young team. South's three sophomore starters have been an important part of the team's success. Finding the right lineup and sticking to it has perhaps been Nagler's best in-season adjustment. Wilson-Traisman has thrived in the cleanup spot knocking in 20 runs. Moving Trachtenberg to right field improved South's outfield defense, Rooke-Ley has been a dynamite leadoff hitter. Sticking with Brown has improved South's offense. The consistency and use of O'Brien and Rooke-Ley on the bump has kept South from being a one arm team and Ward is fresh for a playoff run.

That said, Nagler and his coaching staff will have to elevate their game in the post season to match the moves of their opponents. It's notable that South's potential playoff rivals were behind home plate at South's last home games, notebooks and pens in hand. Playoff baseball with its increased intensity and competition, compacted schedule, unfamiliar opponent and farther travel will challenge every team's coaching staff. Coaches will need to be thinking two, three moves ahead of how they *normally* think during the league season. At times this season South has made moves just late enough to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory, most notably in the Willamette and Sheldon games when Ward was ready in the wings but called on too late. Admittedly coaching is a time consuming, thankless job, and no one does it who doesn't love the game. While it's too easy to coach from the cheap seats, the playoffs will not be forgiving of mistakes; there will be no second chances. As such, the Axemen will have to acknowledge their "Achilles heel", their play on the bases. There's a difference between aggressiveness and recklessness. Coach Nagler will have to lead his boys across this fragile, thin line if South intends to win and advance. During league season the Axemen regularly lost two, three outs a game on the bases, accounting for perhaps three or more of their losses. The hope is greater mental preparation and focus in the atmosphere of playoff baseball will eliminate most of these careless errors. If not, South will make a quick U-turn back to Eugene.

Final Analysis

It can be argued that South Eugene underperformed this season. That may seem an odd argument given South's solid 10-6 record a one game improvement over last year. Though they finished fourth for their second consecutive year and will need a "sub win" to advance, it is this analyst's opinion that top to bottom they are as good as any team in the Midwestern league. What stands in the way of South's success are their mental mistakes. In the playoffs, there are many exceptional baseball teams ready and waiting. The post-season is sudden, exciting and ultimately harsh. Win, you play again, lose...

All South players and coaches can be proud of their efforts and accomplishments, proud of their consecutive trips to the post-season. How far they'll go will depend on many variables only some of which are in their control. Last years run gave South it's first playoff victory in twenty-four years. This year's team is stronger and will look to show it on the field. In the end, there can be only one team in each state division that's crowned champion. As such, there will be many long faces between now and post-season's end. Those long faces will last a day or so, before prom, graduation and summer ball take hold. Youth is resilient. For this South Eugene Axemen team, it's been a great ride with the hope it can continue as long as possible, until a more worthy opponent earns the right to keep their season alive.

Baseball, the game we love, the game that breaks our heart, the game that in spite of breaking our heart we still love. The **2006 South Eugene Axemen Baseball** Season has been a time this senior parent and writer will never forget.