

Petaluma Has Banister to Lean On

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When Petaluma shortstop Samantha Banister digs in for batting practice on her west side turf, it's wise to pay attention.

The University of Arizona-bound senior recently sent a ball caroming off the water tank at the edge of English Street, an estimated 305 feet from the plate. This was after launching a 310-foot opposite-field shot over the school boundary fence and into the middle of Fair Street. These drives would have sailed 100 feet beyond a typical NCAA Division I outfield fence.

Banister is considered one of the elite high school players in the nation, and she leads the Trojans as they set their sights -- behind the live arm of 5-foot-4 junior pitcher Ali

Klemenok -- on a third consecutive 3A Redwood Empire NCS championship. Klemenok, who tossed a no-hitter against Tamalpais last week, struck out 33 batters in last May's NCS playoffs without surrendering an earned run. Banister hit .506 in the post-season and homered in extra innings off an inside fastball to defeat rival Analy 1-0 in the title game at UC Berkeley's Levine-Fricke Field.

Petaluma coach Kurt Jastrow is optimistic but admits his team, at 3-4, is feeling early-season pressure.

"Everyone is up for us this year," he said. "Teams are coming right at us, and we've tried too hard, swinging at first balls and not having a plan. It's definitely in the girls' heads that not many teams around here have won three in a row, and we've pressed, but it will come."

Jastrow also upped the ante by scheduling several rugged early-season matchups.

"I like to put us in one-run games," he said. "We've been in a bunch of dogfights already. The kids get used to being in tight situations, where one mistake can kill you. By the time we get to our key league games, we've been there."

Meanwhile, the coach marvels at the ability of Banister at the plate. An opponent last season actually removed the outfield fence and stationed all three fielders beyond its imprint. After she was retired three times on balls that would ordinarily have been home runs, Jastrow suggested she try settling for a single.

"At first glance Sam doesn't look unusually strong," he said. "But then you see the bat move. She has the bat speed of a one-of-a-kind hitter."

"It's all about rhythm," said Banister. "Staying smooth, not trying to start to the ball too soon. When you really connect, it feels like the bat is weightless, and then you know."

Athletic achievement runs in her family. Her dad, Jon, competed professionally on the rodeo circuit, while her mom, Holly, was one of the first girls in the country allowed into Little League baseball, where she hit an eye-opening home run in an all-star game. She eventually was recruited by Stanford to play volleyball, a sport in which Samantha has made the all-Empire list.

By committing to Arizona, Banister fulfills a dream that has been brewing most of her life.

"When I was 6, I saw (Arizona) on TV in the College World Series and I told my mom right then that I was going to play there some day," she said.

"Sam will have a chance to play an infield spot and contribute offensively," said Arizona coach Mike Candrea, who coached the 2004 U.S. team to Olympic gold.

The Trojans feature one of the top batteries in the NCS with Klemenok, who went 17-4 last

season with a 0.63 ERA while batting .405, and senior Sadie Dolcini, a Division I-caliber catcher.

"When Ali is on her game, that ball dances," Jastrow said. "She'll throw any one of her eight pitches on 3-2, she's got that much confidence."

"She messes with their heads," said Dolcini, "and her riseball is a killer."

Like Banister, Klemenok developed the passion early on.

"At around 9, when I was first exposed to the Olympics, I knew I wanted to take this as far as I could," she said. "I started learning drops and changeups. The curve was hard because the motion is unnatural. The rise took the longest to master; it's by far the toughest pitch.

"Now," she said, "I throw a curve change, a drop-curve change and a straight change, or 'peel drop.' Also a curve, a drop and the

riseball. The screwball is good against left-handed batters. The fastball I use mainly to set up my change."

Klemenok has spent hundreds of hours perfecting her delivery with her dad in an old barn on the family property.

"First, we tried it in the garage," she said, "but it was too short, and someone had to be outside, which was no good at night. My dad re-worked the rafters to give us a clear run in the barn. He sits on a bucket and catches me with a real old glove. He doesn't wear a mask, but he should, he's gotten hit a few times."

Dolcini is the stabilizing influence on the team and a rock-solid defensive catcher. Her arm is one of the strongest in the Empire.

"I like to think not much gets by me," she said.

Her motivation for a third straight NCS championship run is simple: "This is my senior year," she said. "I want it so bad."

-by Ted Gross

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