Home sweet home

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When the 2013 Allan Hancock baseball team takes the field this year, the entire stadium will not be the only new thing in its sights.

The Bulldogs will play in the brand new John Osborne Field with several brand new players to the program. And, after a slow start to the new year, the Bulldogs will open their home schedule this afternoon at 2 p.m. against Porterville.

“We will have only one returning starter in the entire position field and none in the infield,” said Hancock head coach Chris Stevens recently during a visit to the new ballpark. “So we will start at least three freshmen in the infield, maybe four.”

With several new faces, the Bulldogs hope to improve on a subpar 2012 season. Hancock finished 14-22 overall and 9-11 in the very competitive Western State Conference North. Despite the record, the Bulldogs only finished three games behind the conference leaders.

“If it’s not the toughest league, it’s one of the top two,” Stevens said about the WSC North. “Every team is evenly matched and it’s hard to go on the road in this conference and win. I think the championship is typically won on the road and this year we have a new team in the league, with Moorpark dropping baseball, we picked up L.A. Pierce, which means we have to now travel to the San Fernando Valley to play a conference game.”

The most important question for the Bulldogs this early in the season will be getting used to their new field.

“That is a great question and something we’ve discussed as a coaching staff, because we haven’t even played here,” Stevens explained. “And the fact that the whole field is turned around, it won’t even play similar to what we are used to.”

Stevens knows it will take time to get used to the new facility, so he hopes the team will be comfortable when conference play begins.

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The grass is different, so it will play differently and the dirt that we put in is the same infield dirt that Petco Park in San Diego has, so that is completely different dirt than we've played on," Stevens said. "It's the little things that you don't really notice — because dirt is dirt and grass is grass — but it does have some affect on fielders, which is something we will have to get used to."

With larger dimensions in the outfield, team speed will be important and Stevens feels very confident with what he has.

"This is the fastest outfield I have ever coached," Stevens said. "I would put the speed of our outfield up against anyone in the country. Moving into a more spacious park, that can be a big advantage for us — I think they will save us some hits, which will save us some runs."

The lone returning starter from last season is outfielder Tommy Lininger, who Stevens said will be in the middle of the batting order.

Newcomers include Marvin Fight, out of Kansas City, Mo.

"He can really run and he has a strong arm," Stevens said. "He has a lot of pro level skills in terms of strengths."

A pair of former Pioneer Valley Panthers, Kyle Smith and Roger Guillen, will battle for playing time in right field. And a fifth outfielder, Kyle Kelly from San Diego, will also be in the mix.

"We can put any combination of those guys out there in any of the positions and we don't lose a thing," Stevens said. "They are all very sound defensively, they are all fast and they can all swing the bat."

The infield has talent but is still untested. Stevens is looking for Righetti grad Ryan Bendele, a solid player who Stevens said is strong and fast, to start at third, with Jacob Witkowski, out of Utah, at short.

"His high school coach played for me when I was coaching at Oxnard," Stevens said about Witkowski. "He's a real good player."

Stevens is looking at a pair of second basemen, Nick Taitague from Lompoc and Josh Lochmann from Temecula. He said there is a good battle going on at first base with former Hancock pitcher Preston Thomas and Felipe Gonzales from Santa Ynez.

"Gonzalez has been the batting champion in the Los Padres League for the past two years," Stevens said. "I imagine one will be our designated batter if he is not starting at first — they will both see a lot of time.”
Stevens is very happy with the battle behind the plate, with three solid catchers on staff.

"They are all strong, but the two battling for the starting position are Ryan Welker from Santa Ynez and Ron Regalado from Righetti," Stevens said. "Welker is a born leader on the field — he handles the pitching staff well.

"The other one is Ron Regalado, on the position player side, he showed a lot of improvement in the fall — came in, got himself in shape — both will get substantial time."

Stevens also mentioned George Curiel will be part of the mix behind the plate.

"He might be the best hitter of the three," Stevens added. "So he might see more time at DH than behind the plate."

As with most teams at this level, pitching is the big question mark for Hancock.

Stevens said sophomore Ryan Bower out of Lompoc will be one of the team's starters along with two new members, Marc Baker (Nipomo) and Nathan Thompson (Santa Ynez).

"Gabe Hernandez (Arroyo Grande) will be one of our main guys out of the (bullpen)," Stevens said. "Cody Thompson (Righetti), will be a long reliever and did a great job in the fall and Nick Pino (St. Joseph) will be a left-handed specialist."

Stevens also talked about a returning pitcher out of Alberta, Canada, Mitchell St. Laurent.

"I think he will have a substantial role," he explained. "He brings us some flexibility because we can use him as a starter, he's a great long relief guy and we are even considering him as our closer."

Stevens said the biggest adjustment for pitchers new to the community college level is command. Most can command their fastballs but they need to learn how to place the curve ball and add a third pitch.

"At this level you can't be a two-pitch pitcher," Stevens said. "You have to have some kind of change up and you need to be able to throw your fastballs for strikes."

Pitching is all about location as far as Stevens and his staff are concerned and if the pitching staff can hone its skills quick enough, Stevens feels the team will be able to contend in the WSC.

"A lot of guys are new but we're excited about them," Stevens said. "If there is any downfall for us it will be inexperience."

"But it won't be because of desire, work ethic or competitiveness. This freshman class loves to play, I don't have to ask them twice to play hard, they compete and they want to win."

In today's home opener, Hancock faces Porterville at 2 p.m.