

Oklahoma cautious in baseball title defense

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Oklahoma is back to defend its NCAA baseball championship.

"But it doesn't like the term 'defend' — it's too ... defensive."

"In our kids' minds, we're not defending." Sooners coach Larry Cochell said Wednesday. "To them, they say defending was a defensive move. We want to be aggressive and that is the idea of winning, not defending."

Oklahoma, seeded seventh this year, will face second-seeded Florida State in Friday's opening game of the nine-day College World Series. No. 3 Miami will face No. 6 Southern Cal later Friday; on Saturday, No. 8 Stanford will face top-seeded Cal State-Fullerton and No. 4 Clemson will face No. 5 Tennessee.

Oklahoma gave Cochell — the only coach to bring three different schools to the series — his first CWS title last year.

"Everywhere we've gone we've played before the biggest crowds," Cochell said. "We went to Arizona State and drew the largest non-conference crowd

they'd had in eight years. We went to Texas Tech and they had the two largest non-conference crowds they've ever had. The kids had to deal with that ... all year."

The big crowds haven't all been hostile.

Oklahoma set attendance records at home and at the Midwest II Regional. The OU-Auburn final set an NCAA regional record with a crowd of 15,379 at Oklahoma City. Oklahoma (42-14) rewarded the homestate faithful with a 3-1 win over regional top seed Auburn.

Shortstop Rich Hills, who will be making his third trip to Omaha with Oklahoma, said the success in the regionals last year led to the national title. Aggressive play took the Sooners to the title, then and that's what OU wants this year.

Hills is one of seven returning starters from the team that defeated Georgia Tech 13-5 in last year's title game. Cochell appreciated the veteran. Cochell is bringing to this year's series.

Erstad likely first baseball pick

NEW YORK (AP) — Darin Erstad, an outfielder for Nebraska and the punter for the Cornhuskers' national champion football team, is expected to be taken by the California Angels on Thursday as the top pick in the baseball draft.

Erstad, 20, hit .410 in 57 games this year with 20 doubles, 19 homers, 76 RBIs and 11 steals.

"The coaches have tried to make hitting simple. They usually leave it up to me," the native of Jamestown, N.D., said last week. "In the past, I used to think about it a lot more. I'm just seeing the ball and swinging. It's looking bigger."

Erstad, drafted by the New York Mets three years ago after he finished high school, has two years of football eligibility remaining but probably won't punt again.

"I want to play in the big leagues, and get there as fast as I can," he said. "If a team gave me the clearance to play, that'd be great. I'm not optimistic."

California general manager Bill Bavasi refused to discuss the draft Wednesday, but other teams were assuming the Angels would

select Erstad.

San Diego, which picks second, narrowed its choice to either Ben Davis, an 18-year-old catcher at Malvern Prep outside Philadelphia, or Jose Cruz Jr., a 21-year-old outfielder from Rice who's the son of former major leaguer Jose Cruz.

"We've been meeting for the last five days," Padres general manager Randy Smith said of his draft team.

Davis is hitting .507 with six homers and 37 RBIs in 71 at-bats. Cruz hit .377 with 16 homers and 76 RBIs in 223 at-bats.

The Padres, like most teams, conducted psychological and physical testing of their potential picks. The final decision comes down to a guess.

"Usually it's the impact they're going to make at the major league level," Smith said. "Sometimes the difference between one or two slots may be the actual philosophy you're going to take as to who has the highest ceiling."

Seattle, the Chicago Cubs and Oakland have the third through fifth picks and all are expected to go for college players rather than

high schoolers. Others expected to be taken in the top five are Seton Hall right-hander Matt Morris and Todd Helton, a first baseman and pitcher for Tennessee.

Morris was 10-3 with a 2.68 ERA and 104 strikeouts in 94 innings for the Pirates.

Helton hit .413 with 19 homers and 89 RBIs in 242 at-bats and went 7-2 with a 1.75 ERA and 12 saves in three starts and 26 relief appearances. He fanned 65 in 67 innings.

Only the first round of the draft will be announced Thursday, the rest will be released in about 10 days. Teams want to prevent college coaches from using the list for recruiting high schoolers.

Other sons of major leaguers expected to be drafted early are Tom DeCinces of UCLA (son of Doug), Jamie Splitter of Kansas (son of Paul), Chad Sutter of Harrison High School in Marietta, Ga. (son of Bruce), Derek Wathan of Rockhurst High School in Kansas City, Mo. (son of John) and Chad Whitaker of St. Thomas Aquinas High School in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. (son of Steve).

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