Following a disappointing 2013 campaign, the team is relying on youth for a major turnaround.


Three sophomores, slew of freshmen ready for return to top

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Winning the conference title nine years in a row is a feat coaches dream of.

Yet that has been the reality for the Ohlone College softball team and legendary coach Donna Runyon.

Runyon has spoiled the community and college with countless winning seasons and postseason appearances, including capturing the Coast Conference championship from 2003 to 2011.

However, despite a great 2012 season, the Lady Renegades missed the playoffs last year for the first time in more than a decade, making it hard for some of the veterans to take.

"Last year was tough, not making the playoffs and just not living up to what we knew we were capable of," sophomore captain Savanna Ulloa said. "We have a lot of talent on this team. We have the ability to go all the way, win conference and even state, we really do."

Ulloa is solid at first base for Ohlone and is batting .240 on the season with three stolen bases.

Fellow sophomore captain Alyssa Raguini is off to a hot start this season, batting .348 with on-base and slugging percentages over .460. Raguini noted her team’s youth, but did not think it would hinder them at all.

"Being a young team is different, but we have more talent and everybody is ready to listen more and learn," Raguini said. "Everybody on this team is willing to go that extra step. No matter how tired or late it gets, everybody is willing to take that extra grounder or fly ball or whatever it is to help the team get better."

This is also the last year of the field, which will be replaced with new facilities once the Measure G project is complete.

"This is the last year on this field so we have to keep the tradition going and get a circle on the fence," Raguini said, referring to a Coast Conference championship marker that goes on the fence once the team wins the title. Ohlone’s fence is nearly full because of the team’s huge success.

The youth, especially freshman pitcher RaeAnn Garza, is making its presence felt on this team. Garza was a standout at James Lohan High School in Union City and has continued to shine here, helping Ohlone improve to 7-3 overall and 2-0 in conference play.

PHOTOS BY TAM DUONG JR. and HUNG NGUYEN

Yet even the young players know the importance of relying on experience and wisdom.

"Coach Runyon has been in the game so long that I really try and listen to everything she says so I can take it all in and apply it to my game," Garza said. "It is really a privilege to play for coach (Runyon) and I just hope we can close out this field the right way for her."

Garza has pitched 49 innings this season, amassing a 6-2 record, striking out 47 batters and boasting a miniscule 1.57 ERA.