

## A field of their own

### New practice facility means UBC T-Birds are no longer homeless

BY LYNDON LITTLE, VANCOUVER SUN JANUARY 29, 2009



Members of the UBC Thunderbirds baseball team overlook their new high-tech all-weather baseball diamond at the Thunderbird Park complex.

**Photograph by:** Mark Van Manen, Vancouver Sun, Vancouver Sun

A dozen years since first spreading their wings as a fledgling program, the UBC baseball Thunderbirds finally have a nest to call their own.

Home-field vagabonds since reviving intercollegiate baseball at UBC in the late 1990s, the T-Birds have spent the past decade practising and playing their home games at a variety of locations, most recently at Nat Bailey Stadium.

For the coming season the T-Birds will continue to play their home dates at The Nat. But the unveiling Wednesday of the T-Birds' new \$3 million on-campus practice facility with an all-weather Field Turf surface means Canada's only fully-fledged intercollegiate baseball program can no longer be listed among the homeless.

"It's the best of both worlds for us," commented T-Birds' head coach Terry McKaig

at an informal opening on the Point Grey campus. "We love playing our game at The Nat and the Vancouver Canadians have been wonderful to us. But our workouts there can sometimes be troublesome for both us and them. Now we have a place to call our own."

The new UBC baseball facility is part of a larger outdoor athletic complex known as Thunderbird Park. In addition to the baseball diamond it has all-weather fields for field hockey and soccer. Currently under construction next to the ball park is a new 400-metre running track.

"We didn't get the final green light for the baseball facility until last March," explained UBC athletic director Bob Philip.

"But the ball park has come in on time and even a bit under budget. A lot of people stepped up to the plate to make this happen."

The T-Birds kick off their 2009 season Feb. 11 in Redding, Calif., against Simpson University. It's the beginning of their annual season-opening swing through California.

In the past, the 'Birds have flown south in February with little more than a handful of workouts in their indoor batting cage. Now, they'll be able to take full infield and outdoor batting practice before facing their opponents.

The new UBC ball field -- which measures 335-feet down the foul lines and 395 feet to centre -- is completely turfed with the exception of the pitcher's mound. There are dugouts and fencing, but as yet no bleachers. That's Phase Two of the project with room to add permanent seating for approximately 2,500.

"The big plus for us is the lack of maintenance," notes McKaig. "We needed to spend time at Nat Bailey on ground work before we could begin our practice. Now, we can just step on the field here with no preparation."

"It's going to be great," added junior infielder Sammie Starr, one of several Ontario players on the team. "In the past there would often be conflict with our classes trying to get out to Nat Bailey on time for workouts."

After eight non-conference games in California, the T-Birds begin NAIA Region 1 play at the tail-end of their trip with back-to-back doubleheaders Feb. 20-21 against Patten College in Oakland. Patten is part of an expanded Region 1 this season that sees that school plus Simpson join the conference as part of a four-team Southern Division, which also includes Bethany University and Oregon Tech.

The Northern Division will be made up of UBC, College of Idaho, Corban College and Concordia University of Portland.

"The strength of our team this year should be our pitching," predicts McKaig, who is hoping to take his team back to the NAIA College World Series for the first time since 2006.

'BIRD CHATTER: Abraham Fernandez, the son of former Toronto Blue Jay great Tony Fernandez who enrolled at UBC this past fall in hopes for playing baseball for the T-Birds, has dropped out of school for academic reasons ... The T-Birds' home opener is a part of a doubleheader March 13 (noon and 3 p.m.) at Nat Bailey against Corban College.

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