

FRANCIS MARION

LOOKING TO BUILD ON RECENT SUCCESS

By **BILL BALLEW**



The list of head coaches at Francis Marion University is not one of considerable length. In fact, only two men have guided the Patriots on the diamond, beginning with NAIA Hall of Famer George Griffin, who founded the program and led the team to 652 victories in 28 seasons before retiring after the 2000 slate. Griffin's replacement, current FMU skipper Art Inabinet, has continued the winning tradition in Florence, S.C., while consistently ranking among the nation's elite at the Division II level.

The 2011 season serves as an example of the excellence Francis Marion has established under the direction of Inabinet. The Patriots won the Peach Belt Conference regular-season championship and made their third straight appearance in the NCAA D-II Tournament. Along the way FMU won 41 games, equaling the most in program annals, and concluded the campaign ranked ninth in the nation.

"The last four or five years we've been able to be pretty consistent in putting ourselves in a position to go to post-season play," said Inabinet, who served as an assistant under Griffin in 1999 and 2000 before replacing the local legend for the 2001 campaign. "We've been to an NCAA Regional three years in a row but unfortunately we've come up short in two of the last three seasons by getting beat in the championship games both times."

Despite falling just shy of winning the ultra-competitive South Atlantic Region in order to play in the finals at the USA Training Complex in Cary, N.C., Inabinet knows reaching the division's main

event is attainable. After all, he guided the Patriots to the final eight in Montgomery, Ala., in 2006, which represented the culmination of the program's growth under Inabinet's guidance throughout the first half of the decade after Griffin won three NAIA District Six tournaments, in 1974, 1976 and 1988.

The Patriots resided a few games under the break-even mark in Inabinet's first two seasons before surprising the masses with a third-place finish in the Peach Belt in 2003 that included the program's second regional tournament appearance since moving to the D-II level 10 years earlier. Francis Marion returned to the tournament in 2005 prior to posting a 41-18 record a year later while ranking as high as third during the regular season. FMU placed sixth in the nation in 2006, has finished the last seven seasons ranked in the top 30, and will be shooting for a fourth straight NCAA Tournament showing during the 2012 campaign.

"What we try to do is put together as good a team as we can throughout the year so that when the spring season starts we give ourselves every opportunity possible to have a chance to be successful on the field," said Inabinet, who was named the South Region Coach of the Year in 2006 by ABCA and the PBC Coach of the Year in 2011. "The kids have really responded with what we have asked them to do. We feel like we've established a precedent here, and I believe our kids now feel that if we don't make it to a regional every year, then we've had a disappointing season. That's a high level of expectation the players put on themselves."

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the accomplishments of the Patriot baseball program. Throughout its days on the diamond the team has played at Cornell Field, known locally as The Cliff, which was one of the few college fields with an Astroturf infield during the 1970s before it was replaced with natural grass in the 1990s. The ballpark sat 400, with standing room available for approximately 1,000 fans.

The outdated facility is in the process of becoming part of Patriot history. Construction has been constant since January on the west end of the FMU campus where work is being done on the George R. Griffin Athletic Complex. Named for the legendary baseball coach, the \$11.1 million facility will feature separate stadiums for baseball, softball and soccer. There will also be a fieldhouse that will contain offices for the athletic department as well as a lake that should help make the facility as visually appealing as it is functional.

As for the ballpark, known as Cornell Field at Sparrow Stadium, it will have 800 chair-back seats as well as room for 1,500 fans on the surrounding berm. By all accounts, the completed facility, which is scheduled to open in time for the Patriots' 2012 season, will be one of the premier settings at the D-II level.

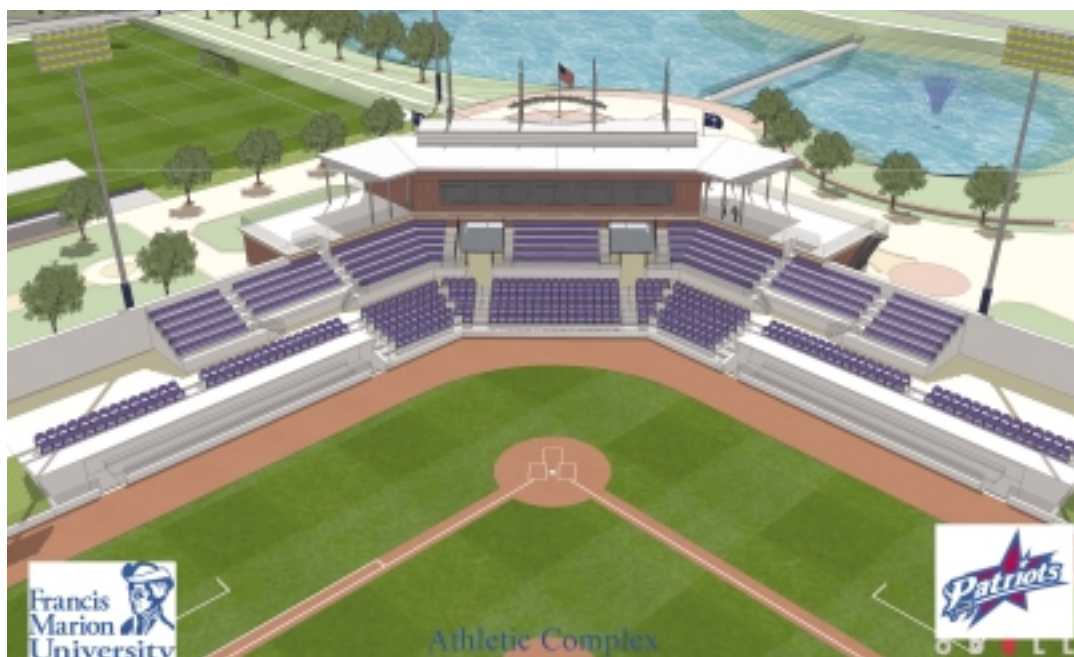
"Our new facility is going to be state of the art," Inabinet said. "It's going to be a great place to show recruits and a very fan-friendly place to watch a game. We're excited as a coaching staff to have that asset in the near future. We feel like it is going to add to our ability to recruit stronger student-athletes and better baseball players. The school somewhat sells itself. We are real proud of our institution, and we are really looking forward to playing in our new facility."

The ballpark should continue to help Inabinet attract players from throughout South Carolina as well as surrounding states and beyond. Nearly half the FMU roster consists of players who are not natives of the Palmetto State. The Patriot coaching staff searches far and wide for talent and signs a combination of freshmen and transfers from both the junior college ranks and Division I schools.

Regardless of a student-athlete's experience, Inabinet is clear regarding what type of player he and assistant coaches Robbie Wilson and Jared Barkdoll look for on the recruiting trail.

"First of all we want a good young man who will be a positive role model for our program and our school," Inabinet said. "Secondly, we want him to be a good student in the classroom. And thirdly, the athletic part, we look for speed, whether that's footspeed or arm strength. Those are the two main assets we recruit here. That's the baseline we use to gauge our pitchers and position players. We want guys who can run and pitchers who can throw with above-average velocity."

In 2011, the new bat regulations instituted by the NCAA brought





Brock McCallister



Don Sandifer

about significant changes in many programs due to the lack of power numbers that were produced. At Francis Marion, the impact of swinging BBCOR models registered nary a blip on the radar. That fact is supported by the statistics from last season, which serve as proof as to how the Patriots play the game.

Last year four FMU players ranked among the nation's top 100 in sacrifice bunts. Second baseman Brock McCallister placed second in the country by dropping down 16, while designated hitter John Jones was 11th with 13. As a team, the Patriots were third nationally in sacrifice bunts with 75 as well as second in sacrifice flies (40), fourth in hits (629) and hit-by-pitches (93), and 17th in runs scored (407).

"The new bat has put a heavier emphasis on 'small ball' throughout college baseball," Inabinet said. "But even before the new bat regulations, we did a lot of hitting and running, bunting and running, and straight sacrificing. The bats really didn't affect us last year. Our leading home run hitter last year had eight, but our park was not conducive for home runs. A power hitter in our park is going to have difficulty."

The power arms also performed admirably by ranking 15th in the nation with a staff ERA of 2.83. The pitchers were effective in getting the ball over the plate by issuing an average of only 2.41 walks per nine innings, good for fifth at the D-II level. The hurlers received plenty of support behind them, with the Patriot defenders placing 11th in the country in fielding percentage at .971.

Much of the same can be expected from Francis Marion in 2012, thanks in part to the return of the team's top two starting pitchers—junior righthander Don Sandifer and sophomore righty Jeffrey Stoner. A native of Bamberg, S.C., Sandifer led the PBC with 11 wins (good for eighth nationally), 105 strikeouts (17th), and an opponents' batting average against of .193. In 108 innings pitched, he allowed only 75 hits and walked 16, good for 31st nationally in fewest bases on balls

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issued per nine innings. He recorded six complete games, including a school-record three shutouts, and was named the Peach Belt's Pitcher of the Year while being named to several All-Region teams.

Stoner made his collegiate debut a memorable one by going 9-0 with a 2.40 ERA in 15 games, including 11 starts, and allowing only 64 hits in 78.2 innings. Inabinet will be looking for a third starter for the weekends as well as reinforcements in the bullpen in order to lock down victories late in games. The Patriots are expecting contributions once again from a handful of senior swingmen, including righthanders Sebie Kirkland and Jarrott Hooks and lefties Jeremy Knab and Matt Broderick.

"With Don and Jeff, that's a positive situation, having two of your top three arms back," Inabinet said. "Those two guys combined were 20-3 and that gives you a good nucleus to build around. We feel that when those two guys pitch, we have a chance to win every time."

Also contributing to the high expectations is the return of senior outfielder Buddy Sosnoskie, who last season became the first Patriot to garner PBC Player of the Year honors by sharing the recognition with co-winner Shawn Ward of Georgia College. The Statesville N.C., product led the conference in hitting by finishing with a .396 batting average and starting every game in center field.

Inabinet also will have the services of third baseman Michael Wilson, who in 2011 became the fifth FMU player to be named PBC Freshman of the Year in the last seven seasons. Wilson led the league with 71 runs scored and batted .374 with 30 RBI.

The Patriots also will be counting on seniors McCallister, who batted .339 last season, and Jones, a .347 hitter with 32 RBI a year ago. Senior outfielder Tyler Boyd is back after contributing a .274 batting average and 23 RBI in 2011. He will be joined in the garden by sophomore Dalton Gress, who joined Wilson in making a strong initial impression by hitting at a .356 clip in 36 games and 25 starts.

"We have four or five returners among our eight position players," Inabinet said. "From the guys we lost, we feel like we filled their spots with quality baseball players. Most of the guys we signed have played some type of college baseball, whether that's a four-year transfer or a junior college transfer. We feel pretty good about where we are right this minute."

Contributions will be needed from one and all if for no other reason than the fact that Inabinet, who has been coaching college baseball for 22 years, says he has never seen as much parity on the diamond as he has witnessed recently at the D-II level. That is particularly true of the three circuits in his region, which includes the Peach Beach, Conference Carolinas and South Atlantic. Upwards of 10 of the nation's top 25 teams hail from one of those three loops, which makes reaching the finals in Cary a tough row to hoe. While some coaches might complain about the constant challenge, Inabinet wouldn't want it any other way.

"This job is a dream come true for me," Inabinet said. "Francis Marion has



Buddy Sosnoskie

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given us every opportunity to be successful here from an administrative standpoint, and the guys we've gotten in here have responded. We just hope we can keep it going and get back to the World Series in the near future."



Jeffrey Stoner