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‘Can’t miss stop’ for MLB scouts, Miami Dade College baseball continues to shine

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Miami Dade College baseball star Luis Guerrero Jr. during practice at the MDC Kendall Campus on Tuesday, Jan. 29, 2019. [PATRICK FARRELL PFARRELL@MIAMIHERALD.COM](mailto:PFARRELL@MIAMIHERALD.COM)

Sophomore center fielder Luis Guerrero, who is from the Bronx in New York City, hadn't heard about the Miami Dade College Sharks until a friend told him about the school and the baseball team a couple of years ago.

“He said it was a great program with a lot of tradition,” Guerrero said. “I looked it up — came to the school, liked it a lot. [They've had] a lot of pro guys, a lot of D1 athletes.”

That's actually an understatement. The MDC program rivals any school in the country — including the University of Miami — in terms of sending players to the pro ranks and the major leagues.

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Back when MDC had baseball teams at three of its campuses — coached by legends Demie Mainieri at Dade-North, Charlie Greene at Dade-South and Steve Hertz at Dade-Downtown — this community college was a “can’t miss stop” for MLB scouts.

Hall of Famers Steve Carlton and Mike Piazza were once on MDC rosters. Other MDC alumni include Placido Polanco, Raul Ibanez, Bucky Dent, Warren Cromartie, Alex Fernandez, Orestes Destrade, Mickey Rivers and Andres Torres.

This past June, six current and three former MDC players were drafted by major-league organizations.

In addition, in the past two years alone, five MDC players have made their major-league debuts: pitchers Derek Law and Jharel Cotton, catcher/first baseman Victor Caratini and outfielders Brian Goodwin and Jabari Blash.

On the field, the last huge year for MDC was in 2014, when coach Danny Price led the Sharks all the way to second place in the JUCO World Series.

This past weekend, the Sharks got off to a 2-0 start for 2019, including an 8-1 win over Chipola, the two-time reigning national champion.

“It sweetens the pot when you play the champs,” veteran MDC pitching coach Kevin Long said. “Our kids played with a lot of energy. They were into every pitch.”

Price, who is also assisted by two former MDC players — recruiting coordinator/hitting coach Adrian Morales and infield/base-running coach Antonio Alvarez — likes the look of his 2019 club.

Chemistry, Price said, is key.

“Our 2014 club was more of a team,” said Price, who is in his ninth year at MDC after three decades leading the FIU program. “Last year was more of a team of prospects. It was a hard team to manage because they were prospects. They kind of stayed prospects, and I don’t mean that in a bad way because they were great kids.

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“This team, I don’t see as much prospect talent. But I see a really good team. This team has a lot of depth. I am really going to have to work to write the lineup [due to so many comparable options].”

An example of that depth was seen in the Chipola game, when the Sharks got terrific production from the eighth and ninth batters in their lineup. Catcher Nico Martinez hit a two-run homer from the eight spot, and shortstop Ralphy Almanzar went 2 for 2 with two walks and three runs scored from the nine spot.

In addition, reliever Henry Ogando earned the win with five strikeouts in four scoreless innings.

Guerrero, the leadoff batter, went 2 for 5 with two RBI.

“He hits the ball really hard,” Long said of Guerrero, who played second base last before he was switched to center field to take advantage of his speed. “He has tools.”

Other MDC starters include first baseman Chris Bohrer; second baseman Mike Alicea; third baseman Jarrett Bickell; right fielder Jose Cristomo-Bock; left fielder Bryan Sanjuro and DH Ian Claudio.

Alicea’s uncle, by the way, is former major-league infielder Luis Alicea.

The pitching staff, besides Ogando, includes Blake Baker, Ediel Freytes, Jesus Valoy, Gabriel Figueroa and Collin Kiernan.

The closer is Orlando Ribalta, a 6-7, 245-pounder whose fastball has reached 97 mph.

“He throws a ton of strikes downhill,” Long said. “He tried to be a position player, and that didn’t work out. But he’s very athletic, and he’s close to finding a legitimate breaking ball, which would be big for him.”

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If it goes like it has for decades at MDC, players such as Ribalta, Guerrero and others will develop and reach the pro ranks, continuing the proud tradition.

OTHER LOCAL SCHOOLS

BARRY UNIVERSITY

Coach: Juan Ranero; Last season: 22-28, 9-21; Top players: Andrew Rapoza (Jr. OF); Myles Gayman (Jr. RHP); JC Garcia (Jr. 2B); Noteworthy: The Bucs have had 20 players drafted since 2009, including Jonathan Quintana in the 31st round last year by the Nationals. Off this year's team, Gayman – a Penn State transfer with a mid-90s fastball – is projected to be drafted in the top 12 rounds, and Rapoza is a preseason All-South Region selection. Rapoza hit .352 last season with a .901 OPS.

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

Coach: Greg Brown; Last season: 35-16, 24-6; Top players: Garrett Wolforth (Sr. C); Samuel Duran (Sr. OF); Ian Acevedo (Sr. 3B); Noteworthy: Under Brown, NSU has made the NCAA Tournament in six of the past eight years. This year, the Sharks are ranked 20th nationally by Collegiate Baseball News, and Duran is a preseason All-American.

NAIA

FLORIDA MEMORIAL

Coach: Florentino Burgos; Last season: 26-21, 13-11 (Sun Conference); Top players: Edgard Aparicio (Jr. RHP); Christian Rivera (Jr. RHP); Noteworthy: Burgos was named Coach of the Year by Black College Nines as the Lions improved from 10-30 to 26-21 in his second season on the job. Sergio Chil has departed the roster after winning the Sun Conference batting title with a .431 average. This year, the Lions are picked to finish fifth in the league, and they have added ex-major leaguer Antonio Alfonseca as their pitching coach.

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ST. THOMAS

Coach: Jorge Perez; Last season: 56-9, 22-2 Sun Conference; Top players: Jackie Urbaez (Sr. 2B); Chris Garabedian (Sr. 1B/3B); Orlando Rodriguez (Sr. RHP); Noteworthy: The Bobcats made their sixth trip to the NAIA World Series last year. The Bobcats had three players drafted by MLB last season. Perez coached Team USA in Cuba last July.

NJCAA (community colleges)

ASA

Coach: Robert Martin; Last season: 23-25; Top players: Jose Ulloa (So. RHP); Alejandro Vazquez (So. SS); Eduardo Castillo (Fr. C); Noteworthy: Martin replaces Jonathan Hernandez, who became head coach at Bethune-Cookman. Ulloa, by the way, has committed to Bethune-Cookman.

BROWARD COLLEGE

Coach: John Broderick; Last season: 32-14; Top players: Andrew Fernandez (So. C); Ed Arteaga (So. LF/1B); Zak Sprankle (Fr. RHP); Noteworthy: Seahawks won the Southern Conference last season, but Ben Bizier bolted for another coaching job. In July, the Seahawks had no staff and a depleted roster before 12 players were signed. Broderick is a former Broward College shortstop.

MIAMI DADE COLLEGE

Coach: Danny Price; Last season: 35-17, 18-10; Top players: Orlando Ribalta (So. RHP); Mike Alicea (So. INF); Louis Guerrero (So. CF); Noteworthy: MDC, which finished second in the nation as recently as 2014, had six of its players drafted by MLB last season, a remarkable number but in line with the grand history of this program that once had Hall of Famers Steve Carlton and Mike Piazza on its roster.

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MDC coach Danny Price gives his team advice during practice. PATRICK FARRELLPFARRELL@MIAMIHERALD.COM