

ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Crean Lutheran has a field it can call home

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A drive on Portola Parkway provides a pleasant vista of green foothills and canyons that seem to go on forever – at least until you drive west of Sand Canyon Road and a little gem of a ballpark fills your vision.

It is the new stadium for the Crean Lutheran High School baseball team, abutted on each side by a softball field, tennis courts and sand volleyball courts.

Home never looked so good.

Crean Lutheran is in its eighth year of existence, the school has been playing baseball for seven, and only on the varsity level for six. In the early years, it would use whatever city park field it could find for practice and home games. These Saints often marched to a bus for all games.

The new field is the latest payoff for the school, a \$3 million project that officially opened for business Feb. 28 when the Saints hosted Northwood in a doubleheader, winning the season and park opener, 4-3, before a 4-1 loss in the second game. Crean played a dry-run exhibition game on Jan. 31 vs. Orange High and a scrimmage against Salesian in early February.

The park is as professional looking as any college stadium, with large dugouts and locker rooms and bright green fencing with a foothill as the batter's back drop.

"It's nice to have a home," Jake Haney, the only coach the baseball team has had, said.

"They did a great job making it fundamentally good as a park and making it look so nice. There's a real sense of pride about it."

"It's surreal," senior third baseman Chris Cooper said. "It's very humbling to play on this field knowing all the struggles there were in starting a program."

Haney quickly took the program from start-up to success.

In 2009, Haney took over the baseball program and fielded a junior varsity team that was numbers challenged.

"We had only 10 players," the native of Gilroy, just south of San Jose, said. "We always worried what we'd do if a guy got sick."

"We took our lumps in the first year of varsity (2010, 5-13), but by our second year we finished second in the league."

The Saints have improved each season. They won 17 games in 2011, 18 in 2012, 20 in 2013 and posted a sparkling 25-5-1 mark in 2014 that included a run to the CIF Division 6 semifinals. A team with only two seniors, Crean was beaten in the semis by Capistrano Valley Christian, a long-time small school power that's been around for more than 40 years.

Crean is ranked No. 1 in Division 6 in both the Orange County Register 2015 preseason poll as well as the CIF-SS poll. There are eight seniors on the team and six earned post-season honors in 2014, including Cooper and catcher Paul Sardo.

Haney pitched at Centenary College in Shreveport, Louisiana, and started his coached career at Eastside Christian in Fullerton. When the Crean job opened up, Haney said he "took a leap of faith" by going to a school where he would have to build a program.

"It was more of a challenge than I thought it would be," he said. "I thought the kids would flow in, but the growth of the school was slow. Parents and students started to take notice of what we were doing soon enough."

Crean is the only Christian-based high school in Irvine, which Haney believes has been an advantage, providing parents looking for private school alternatives to schools on the edges of the city, like Orange Lutheran, Santa Margarita and JSerra.

Most of the team is home grown, too. "We've only had a few transfers," he said. "Almost all of our seniors (eight) have been here since they were freshmen."

Cooper remembers watching Orange Lutheran High games when he was in middle school. "They played a game against Crean one year and I really appreciated the way coach Haney ran the team and talked to the players," he said. "There was a real sense of respect."

"The idea of going to a school without much history was appealing. It feels good to have set a precedent for baseball here."

Sardo's older brother played at Oxford Academy. "Oxford was a rival of Crean, and he talked with coach Haney after games. My family sort of grew into the idea of going to a new school."

The Saints would like to make the first season in their new home the first season to win a CIF title.

"This is our cornerstone group of players, the first time we have as many seniors as we do and players who have been a part of the program since they were freshmen," Haney said. "They've already contributed a lot to the program."

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