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Piscotty's average keeps soaring

By john reid
Daily News Staff Writer

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Stanford sophomore third baseman Stephen Piscotty has been hitting the tar out of the ball. Piscotty, his average at a team-leading .370, hopes to knock the tar out of the Tar Heels as the Cardinal visit seventh-ranked North Carolina in this weekend's super regional. First game of the best-of-three series is Friday at noon (TV: ESPN2).

Piscotty is coming off a torrid regional in Fullerton, where he went a combined 7-of-14 with four RBIs and six runs scored. Piscotty's solo shot in the bottom of the sixth inning, his third homer of the year, helped beat host Fullerton 1-0. The Cardinal went on to rout Illinois 14-2 as Piscotty went 3-for-6 with a double.

"It feels great to be able to go through Fullerton and win three games in a row," Piscotty said. "It gives us confidence going into this weekend."

Piscotty is one of the few Cardinal players who hasn't suffered a hitting slump, though the majority of those players have righted themselves just in time. Piscotty has 80 hits, 12 doubles, 40 RBIs and 34 runs scored. His season isn't a surprise, considering he hit .326 as a freshman on his way to being named Pac-10 Freshman of the Year. He was selected to the All-Pac-10 first team this season.

"I'm seeing the ball well," Piscotty said. "Mechanically, I've been putting a lot of work in. It's all starting to click for me. Hopefully, I can keep it rolling."

"Stephen has been our most consistent hitter," Stanford coach Mark Marquess

said. "It's a carryover from last year."

Piscotty bats cleanup behind Tyler Gaffney, who has a 20-game hit streak.

"Piscotty is one of the best hitters I've ever seen in college," Gaffney said. "I love having him hitting behind me. They're going to have to pitch to me because you're not going to want to pitch to Stephen. He's a very underrated player. I don't see many college players doing what he's doing."

Piscotty has faced some of the top pitchers in the country, but he has more than held his own. He's learning what pitch pitchers desire to get him out with.

"It's tough to say," Piscotty said. "I've seen pitchers come in hard with fastballs. I've seen some stay away. I try to be ready for anything."

Piscotty's homer against hard-throwing Titans ace Noe Ramirez was a jolt the underdog Cardinal needed dearly.

"It was a first-pitch fastball," Piscotty said. "Ramirez has very good stuff. His changeup was really working. I was fortunate to get that fastball and get a good swing on it early in the count. I had let two fastballs go earlier and was kicking myself about that. That was the biggest hit I've ever had."

"It was unreal when Stephen hit that home run," Gaffney said. "He had only a couple of homers this season, so we razzed him a little bit about it before he hit it."

Piscotty is a tough out, having struck out 27 times, second least among Stanford starters. In two seasons, Piscotty has whiffed 45 times in 443 at-bats.

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"We always joke that Stephen's the best with two strikes," Cardinal closer Chris Reed said. "You get him with two strikes and he's at the advantage because he's going to put the ball in play. He has great hand-eye coordination."

Piscotty played 28 games at first base and 28 in left field last season. The transition to third base has been rocky for Piscotty, who has made 14 errors. He played shortstop in his prep days at Amador Valley-Pleasanton.

"It's part of the transition," Piscotty said. "I've been satisfied, but I know I have a lot of work to put in during the offseason. I'm loving third base. That's where I want to play in the future."

"Third base is the toughest position to play in college," Marquess said. "The ball gets on you so quickly. He's had quite a few errors for him, but he's also made some great plays."

Piscotty was drafted out of high school by the Dodgers in the 45th round. A four-year varsity player, he was a three-time first team All-East Bay Athletic League pick. He played in the Area Code Games at Long Beach State's Blair Field alongside future Stanford teammate Kenny Diekroeger of Woodside. Piscotty narrowed his choices to Stanford, Cal and Oregon.

Vanderbilt's Sonny Gray, Taylor Jungmann of Texas, UCLA's Gerrit Cole and Trevor Bauer were just a few of the great arms Piscotty has faced this season. Cole was taken by the Pittsburgh Pirates as the No. 1 overall pick in Monday's MLB First-Year Player Draft, while Bauer was chosen at No. 3 by the Arizona Diamondbacks. Jungmann went to the Milwaukee Brewers at No. 12. Gray went to the Oakland A's at No. 18.

"We've faced great arms," Piscotty said. "Bauer is the best guy I've faced in two seasons. He throws hard and is deceptive. His curveball has a lot of break to it."

The Tar Heels have two outstanding starters in Patrick Johnson and Kent Emanuel -- a combined 19-2.

"North Carolina is a very good club," Piscotty said. "We have to bring the same energy we had against Fullerton. Everyone was into the game. We need to bring the same intensity. We'll have the pressure of

playing in front of their home crowd, but a lot of guys on our team enjoy that. We need to get some runs on the board to fuel us up."

Piscotty is majoring in atmosphere and energy.

"It's in the engineering realm," Piscotty said. "The renewable energy thing is the hot topic. It will have an impact on the world."

Piscotty has added to the atmosphere and energy of a Stanford club that is two wins away from a berth in the College World Series.

Email John Reid at jreid@dailynewsgroup.com.



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