

Arizona State's Jackson Takes Offense To New Heights Against SCU

[AT THE BALLPARK Shotgun Spratling](#) - February 18, 2024

PHOENIX — Pitching in the desert is unforgiving, especially as temperatures rise. Then there are days where it's even worse, and the bullpen wishes it could cut the telephone line from the dugout to avoid sending anyone else out to the slaughter. Saturday afternoon's matchup between Santa Clara and Arizona State fell into the latter category.

Pitchers with all-conference expectations and conference pitcher of the year potential were shelled to the tune of 33 combined hits. Sixteen went for extra bases, leading to the scoreboard displaying a tally reserved for the guys that wear shoulder pads. No lead was safe as runs were distributed by the bushel and momentum swung as quickly as the teams exchanged places in the batter's box.

Ultimately, Arizona State was able to fend off Santa Clara's last rally attempts with two scoreless innings to close out a 14-13 victory at Phoenix Municipal Stadium that earned the Sun Devils a season-opening series win with a chance to go for the sweep Sunday.

Sun Devils head coach Willie Bloomquist joked after the game that he could use a cigarette even though he doesn't smoke. It was a stressful game. It was frustrating. It was exhausting. But ultimately he was satisfied his team found a way to get the win to take the series.

"Better to win ugly, then lose pretty," Bloomquist said.

The Sun Devils jumped out to a 2-0 lead in the first inning without hitting anything particularly hard, but quickly trailed. Santa Clara knocked three consecutive run-scoring hits with two outs in the second inning, highlighted by a Jon Berring opposite field two-run double to the wall. The Broncos lead lasted an inning before a Sun Devil deluge.

Arizona State put up an eight spot in the third inning, chasing starter Brandon Gomez after the first five batters reached base. Ryan Campos led off with a walk.

Jacob Tobias and Kevin Karstetter followed with two-strike singles to load the bases for Isaiah Jackson, who attacked the first pitch for a two-run single to left field. Brandon Compton doubled home two runs on the next pitch. Santa Clara ace reliever Blake Hammond came on to try to stop the bleeding, but struggled to command his most dynamic weapon, a normally elite 12-to-6 curveball that when right he snaps off for strikes or for chases. He got an out but then walked back-to-back batters to load the bases, and Nu'u Contrades unloaded them, driving a 1-0 pitch over the wall in center field for a grand slam to put the Sun Devils up 10-4.

The Broncos wouldn't go away though. Their veteran lineup just kept plugging along, chipping away, inning after inning. They scored two runs in the fourth, two in the fifth and took the lead with a four-run sixth inning. They used some small ball, scoring on a safety squeeze for one run. They used the long ball as WCC Preseason Player of the Year Efrain Manzo drove his first over the wall this season with a line drive just inside the foul pole. Then in the four-run sixth, Santa Clara doubled ASU to death with four extra-base rockets to all parts of the field.

But the lead was short lived. Three pitches into the bottom half of the inning, Jacob Tobias hit Arizona State's third of four home runs to tie the score, 12-12. The tie only lasted slightly longer. Karstetter walked and then trotted home when Jackson hit his second homer in as many days.

Santa Clara pulled within a run in the top of the seventh when Manzo drove in his third run of the game with his fourth hit. He eventually was stranded at second, same as Jordan Lewis in the eighth.

Arizona State freshman closer Cole Carlon didn't give them the same opportunity in the final frame. He pitched a 1-2-3 ninth against the top of the Broncos' lineup to lock up the one-run victory.

"He has stuff, that we're kind of missing up and down the pitching staff. He has a little bit more stuff than everybody else," Bloomquist said. "That's why I like him back there, and he's not afraid and likes to come after guys.

"His fastball plays up. With his height and extension he gets, he's a low- to mid-90 mph arm, but it plays a little bit higher than that."

The Breakdown

Game Changer

Blake Hammond had missed with a pair of curveballs to fall behind 2-0 to Isaiah Jackson. Jackson knew Hammond had to attack the strike zone with a fastball, and when he left one up, Jackson pounced, launching a home run that not only cleared the fence and cleared the bullpen, but also cleared the Whiteman Family Performance Center in right field.

Sun Devils in the bullpen raced out past the facility to try to find the crater left by the ball when it finally came out of orbit somewhere between 450-500 feet away from home plate.

"I've never hit a ball that good," Jackson said with a smile after the game, confirming it was the longest home run he's ever hit. "There's no better feeling actually because when you get it, you know you got it and you give a little look and all the boys are hyped, the energy of the crowd...there's no better feeling."

There's no better feeling for Arizona State than having Jackson in the batter's box so far this season. He's got six hits (four for extra bases) and driven in nine runs in 10 at-bats through the first two games.

"That's what he's capable of when he's aggressive and stays balanced. He can clearly hit the ball a long ways. It's fun to watch him break out a little bit offensively because he's a guy that we're going to need. We need him to be consistent throughout the year, and he's started off great."

The 6'3", 205-pound Jackson has been a tantalizing prospect for a few years dating back to his high school days. The younger brother of former Utah two-way player and current MLB pitcher Andre Jackson, Isaiah was selected in the 18th round of the 2022 draft by the Houston Astros but chose to honor his commitment to Arizona State.

He was an everyday starter as a freshman last year but went through his ups and downs. He struggled early in the season and was hitting .218, 2, 11 with a .272 on-base percentage halfway through the season. Jackson saw definite

improvements in the second half of the season. His strikeout rate declined; his walk rate tripled; he drove the ball more, hitting .278, 6, 17 with a .400 OBP.



But there was still plenty of room to grow. The focus was on consistency and aggression. The physical adjustment was Jackson working to being more balanced throughout his entire swing, but just important was the philosophical adjustment to attack early and often.

“They told me I played a little too passive, and that’s when I struggled a little bit at the plate,” Jackson said. “It’s just not letting the pitcher take control of the at-bat. Understanding I’m in control of the at-bat, he’s got to come at me and when he makes that pitch that I’m able to hit, if he leaves it up, I’ll get my job done.”

“In the past, he’s been very selective,” Bloomquist said, “almost too selective to the point where it’s like man, you’re so talented, just be ready to freaking go, be ready to hit and he’s done a good job of that the first two games.”

Jackson came up with the bases loaded in each of his first two plate appearances Saturday. Facing talented Santa Clara lefty Brandon Gomez, Jackson wasn’t looking for a perfect pitch that he could drive for a grand slam. He knew Gomez was probably going to throw a pitch in the zone trying to get ahead in the count, so he attacked both times. He didn’t smash the ball with

either swing, but he made solid contact, driving a two-run single up the middle to give the Sun Devils the early lead and then hitting a two-run single the other way to left field to tie the score in the third inning.

If Jackson, who has been hitting in the six hole, plays to his potential, the Sun Devils' lineup starts getting really long, especially when Nick McLain returns from a hamate bone injury and gets back in the mix.

"It just lengthens the lineup. It's one more dangerous bat to have to pitch to. When he's swinging the way he is right now, it just adds one more threat that you can't get out," Bloomquist said. "It makes guys have to throw better pitches to the guys in front of him because they don't want him coming up with guys on base."

Star Spotlight



As good as Jackson has been the first two days, Santa Clara outfielder JonJon Berring has been just as good. Berring, like Jackson, has two homers and two doubles through the first two days. But it's come in a different package.

Rather than being a middle-of-the-lineup bat, Berring is the Broncos' leadoff hitter. Instead of having Jackson's prototypical MLB draft size, Berring is a sawed-off ball of muscle at 5'7", 175 pounds. It's not hard to recognize Berring as a former

high school football player from both his physicality and the way he plays the game. (He scored 21 touchdowns playing receiver and defensive back for Palma High in Salinas, Calif.)

“He’s a great player. He’s dynamic, man,” Rusty Filter said. “I mean, he hasn’t even really got to shown his best tool. The guy can fly.”

Berring has 35 combined stolen bases the last two years. That could be a number he challenges this year, if he ever stops at first. He has showcased his ability to use the entire field, driving a pair of homers out to right field Friday — surpassing last year’s home run total and tying his career best season (while still having 50+ games to play). Then he showed his ability to drive the ball the other way Saturday, hitting a two-run double to the left field wall and lining another down the left line later. He also hit an RBI single to center field.

But the most impressive part of Berring’s 2024 debut weekend has been his continued plate discipline growth. His ability to recognize pitches has been completely transformed during his time at Santa Clara. His strikeout rate has plummeted from what it was his first two seasons, going from 54.6 percent in a handful of at-bats as a freshman to 27.3 percent as a starter his second year and dropping down to 16.5 percent in his breakout 2023 campaign. Congruently, Berring went from being a .211 hitter his first two seasons to hitting .315, 1, 24 last season.

“He’s definitely a student of the game trying to learn,” Filter said. “He goes, we go usually. If he gets on, we go, so I’ve been really pleased with him the first two days.”

Top Performances

Santa Clara:

- JonJon Berring: 3-for-6, 2 R, 2 2B, 3 RBI
- Efrain Manzo: 4-for-5, 3 R, 2B, HR, 3 RBI, BB
- Dylan Joyce: 3-for-5, 3 R, RBI
- Jordan Lewis: 3-for-4, 2 R, RBI, BB, SB

Arizona State:

- Isaiah Jackson: 3-for-5, 2 R, HR, 6 RBI

- Nu'u Contrades: 2-for-5, 2 R, grand slam, 4 RBI
- Jacob Tobias: 3-for-5, 2 R, 2B, HR, RBI
- Cole Carlon: IP, 0 H, 0 BB, K; Save

Bottom Line

Santa Clara

– “It just seems like we barreled a few, and they’ve gotten to the track. And they’ve barreled a few and they’ve gotten out,” Santa Clara head coach Rusty Filter said. “I think that’s the difference, honestly.”

Arizona State

– “We’re being tested, which is good. Certainly today with having to bounce back, so that part is good,” Arizona State head coach Willie Bloomquist said. “But the roles are going to continue to evolve and form on the pitching staff. I think you can see that, if it’s good or bad, but no job is safe.”