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Pitching And Defense Remains Constants For USA Collegiate National Team

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Throughout the intrasquad scrimmages that the USA Collegiate National Team participated in, strong pitching and defense were the two common themes that were always on display. During the third game of the five-game Friendship Series against Cuba, that trend continued at a higher level, allowing USA to clinch the series with an 8-0 win.

"Pitching and defense, and you have to give our starting pitching a ton of credit," head coach Dan McDonnell said. "Nick (Frasso) was good (...) we're throwing strikes and playing really good defense."

Righthander Nick Frasso started on the mound for the CNT and got things started with a strikeout in the first inning. From then on, Frasso never looked back, powered by his fastball that peaked at 90-91 mph.

"I was just trying to attack hitters with my fastball and just be aggressive to get them out quick." Frasso said.

Frasso elaborated on how more opportunities are opened up for him when his fastball is going early.

"When I get my fastball going, it allows me to throw other breaking stuff and it keeps the hitters off balance so it makes my outing better," Frasso said

Frasso pitched four innings, allowing two hits and no walks. The Loyola Marymount sophomore

faced the minimum. Lefthander Andrew Abbott emerged from the bullpen to take over for Frasso, but was pulled after just one inning when a lightning delay paused the game.

Righthander Jeff Criswell took over for USA after the delay and allowed just one hit in three innings, striking out three. Criswell credited his confidence on the mound to his team's impressive defense.

"I just try to go out there and compete. I've got a lot of trust in that defense, you know, those are the best players in the country so it's easy to go out there," Criswell said. "(...) It's definitely a momentum builder. It's everything you need from your defense so you can't ask for much more and they played phenomenal tonight."

Through the first three games against Cuba, USA has allowed just three runs and it's safe to say that McDonnell is impressed with his squad.

"They're attacking the zone with the fastball. With the defense, I think our pitchers get a good feeling looking at the guys behind them and going 'wow those are some nice plays'," McDonnell said. "Nick (Frasso) did a really good job with his big looping breaking ball, spotting up his fastball. You saw it with Criswell too with his really good slider."

First baseman Spencer Torkelson, who went 2-for-4, kicked off the offensive action with a two-strike double to right field. Outfielder Colton Cowser was able to send Torkelson home with another two-strike hit to right field and later advanced to second when designated hitter Heston Kjerstad reached first by fielder's choice.

"Tonight the key was two-strike hitting," McDonnell said. "(...) we moved the ball a couple of times to get a guy over or get a guy in and we played really good, sound baseball tonight."

The floodgates were opened when infielder Nick Loftin knocked a bunt down the left field line and Cuba lefthander Yudiel Rodriguez overshot the throw to first, rocketing the ball into foul territory. Kjerstad and Cowser were both able to score, bringing the USA lead to 5-0.

Despite the impressive performance and the series being clinched after three games, the CNT made it clear that they still have more to prove.

"This is what we were striving for, but you can't be satisfied," Criswell said. "You have to do the same thing for the next two games and continue to compete and fill up the strike zone."

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