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2021 National Runner-Up Biola Named Preseason Favorite

IRVINE, Calif. – After making a run to the national title game last spring, Biola has been voted by the PacWest softball coaches as the preseason favorite as the Eagles search for their first PacWest title on the heels of a historic season.

Concordia, which topped Biola in the PacWest SoCal Pod during the regular season last year, received two first-place votes and is ranked second in the preseason poll. Biola's **Paige Austin** was voted the Preseason Pitcher of the Year, while Concordia's catcher **Sydney Sprinkle** is the Preseason Player of the Year.

After taking second place in the PacWest SoCal Pod last season, Biola went on a historic run that ended in Denver, Colorado, in the Game 3 of the national championship series. The Eagles won seven of eight games in the postseason to take a one-game lead in the national championship series before West Texas A&M came from behind to win the national title.

Austin was a key part of Biola's postseason run, pitching 45.1 innings in the postseason with 44 strikeouts and five wins. At one point, Austin made four-consecutive starts without any runs allowed, including three complete-game shutouts. Austin has 57 career wins with a 1.51 ERA and 572 strikeouts in 520 innings pitched for Biola.

Biola will have a few new faces in the batting lineup as well as in the head coach position. **Kristin Halte** is Biola's new head coach, and has a pair of Preseason All-PacWest selections among her position players with **Abie Nowak** at first base and **Allie Beck** in the outfield. The Eagles also return **Raylene Roybal** and **Jennifer Morinishi** to the pitching staff. Morinishi will also play in the outfield and be an important part of the Eagles' lineup with her career batting average of .332.

Concordia earned the right to host the 2021 NCAA West Regional after collecting a 15-9 record in the PacWest SoCal Pod. The Eagles graduated the reigning PacWest Player and Pitcher of the Year in McKinsey Thorpe and Callie Nunes, who goes down as one of the best pitchers in PacWest softball history. However, Concordia returns a strong lineup that includes **Sydney Sprinkle**, who is the Preseason Player of the Year. The senior catcher, who also plays first base, enters the season with 17 career home runs and a .524 slugging percentage. Last year, she hit two home runs in Concordia's win over Hawai'i Hilo to help the team win the PacWest AQ Pod Series.

The Eagles also return **Megan Massa** in the outfield. The speedy lefty has a .378 on-base percentage in her career and is on the cusp of reaching 100 career runs scored. **Erika Morris** is also on the Preseason All-PacWest team, leading a strong pitching staff for Concordia, which also includes **Rae Flores** and transfer **Katlin Entrup**.

Hawai'i Hilo won the PacWest Hawai'i Pod last season, earning a trip to the NCAA West Regional, where the Vulcans finished in third place in the region. They are now ranked third in the PacWest Preseason Poll with first-year head coach **Aisha Sueda** taking over the program. The Vulcans have 11 players returning from last year, including corner infielders **Skyler Thomas** and **Chloe Domingo**.

Azusa Pacific is fourth in the coaches poll ahead of the season. The Cougars spent most of last season taking on the two finalists of the NCAA West Regional, and they held their own finishing the season with a .500 record. The Cougars have three players on the Preseason All-PacWest Team. **Aly Montesino** proved to be a threat last year whether she was pitching or batting, earning first-team All-PacWest honors. She earned eight wins with a 2.39 ERA in the circle, while crushing four home runs with a .389 batting average.

According to the coaches' votes, the Cougars have the best left-side of the infield with three-time All-PacWest shortstop **Amanda Woods** along with third-baseman **Dani Burghardt**, who were both named to the preseason team. Last year, the duo combined for 66 base-hits and six home runs.

Dominican won the PacWest NorCal Pod last year and is picked fifth in this year's poll. **Peyton Mott** was named to the Preseason All-PacWest Team after recording a .375 batting average last year with 14 extra-base hits. She hit a triple and scored a run to help the Penguins defeat Hawai'i Hilo in the first game of the PacWest AQ Pod Series.

Academy of Art is sixth in the preseason poll after narrowly finishing behind the Penguins in the NorCal Pod standings. Reigning PacWest Freshman of the Year **Haley Randall** as well as **Lauryn Henderson** were named to the Preseason All-PacWest team as **Nikki Gentile** goes into her second year as the Urban Knights' head coach. Randall and Henderson each hit five home runs last year, and Henderson boasted a .788 slugging percentage to power Academy of Art's offense.

Hawai'i Pacific was voted in seventh place in the preseason poll followed by Chaminade and Holy Names. Chaminade took second place in the PacWest Hawai'i Pod last season, while Hawai'i Pacific and Holy Names each took third place in their respective pods. The 2022 softball season starts today with a pair of games at Hawai'i Pacific, which is hosting Corban. Then on Wednesday, Holy Names will host Humboldt State, while Chaminade plays against Corban at home.

The rest of the conference will begin its season this weekend. Preseason favorite Biola will face reigning GNAC champion Northwest Nazarene on Thursday. Then on Friday, the annual Concordia Kick-Off Classic begins. This year's jam-packed tournament includes 21 teams from all over the West and South-Central regions with representatives from four conferences. Seven of the PacWest's nine teams will be in attendance along with GNAC preseason favorite Western Washington and CCAA preseason favorite Chico State, making this a true NCAA West Regional preview.

There is no shortage of games to circle on the schedule for the annual tournament, but right at the top of the docket is Biola's game against Chico State as the preseason favorites from two of the West Region conferences square off. Concordia will also get a chance to take on both of the CCAA and GNAC preseason favorites as well as Northwest Nazarene, which was picked second in the GNAC preseason poll.

The PacWest season begins on February 24 with Dominican hosting a four-game series against Concordia in a battle of Pod Champions from last year. The regular season then ends on May 1 with Hawai'i Pacific making a trip to the big island for a final doubleheader against Hawai'i Hilo. The top teams in the NCAA West Region will then advance to the regional championship, which will be hosted by the No. 1 seed on May 12-15. The PacWest's regular season champion will earn an automatic bid.



2022 PACWEST SOFTBALL PRESEASON POLL			
	TEAM	POINTS	2021 RECORD
1.	Biola (7)	79	26-16 (14-10)
2.	Concordia (2)	74	34-13 (15-9)
3.	Hawai'i Hilo	53	19-13 (16-8)
4.	Azusa Pacific	52	18-18 (7-17)
5.	Dominican	41	17-19 (15-9)
6.	Academy of Art	39	15-13 (14-10)
7.	Hawai'i Pacific	28	8-16 (8-16)
8.	Chaminade	27	12-12 (12-12)
9.	Holy Names	12	7-17 (7-17)
<i>First-place votes in parenthesis</i>			

2022 PRESEASON ALL-PACWEST SOFTBALL TEAM					
Name	School	Pos.	Class	B/T	Hometown/Previous School
Sydney Sprinkle *	Concordia	C	Sr.	R/R	Palm Desert, Calif./Palm Desert
Abie Nowak	Biola	1B	So.	L/R	Winchester, Calif./Vista Murrieta
Haley Randall	Academy of Art	2B	So.	R/R	Walnut Creek, Calif./Northgate
Dani Burghardt	Azusa Pacific	3B	Sr.	L/R	Corona, Calif./Corona
Amanda Woods	Azusa Pacific	SS	Sr.	R/R	Glendora, Calif./Glendora
Allie Beck	Biola	OF	So.	L/L	Upland, Calif./Upland
Megan Massa	Concordia	OF	Sr.	L/R	Fairfield, Calif./Rodriguez
Peyton Mott	Dominican	OF	Sr.	R/R	Napa, Calif./Napa
Lauryn Henderson	Academy of Art	DP	Sr.	R/R	Gilbert, Ariz./Campo Verde
Paige Austin ^	Biola	P	Sr.	R/R	Los Alamitos, Calif./Los Alamitos
Aly Montesino	Azusa Pacific	P	So.	L/L	Murrieta, Calif./Vista Murrieta
Erika Morris	Concordia	P	Sr.	R/R	Laguna Hills, Calif./Laguna Hills

* - Preseason Player of the Year

^ - Preseason Pitcher of the Year