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## Stanford baseball's 'steal squad' is contributing to success in a new way

==B By Rick Eymer==

Palo Alto Online Sports

Alex Blandino, Brett Michael Doran and Danny Diekroeger formed a special bond early. They sat on the bench together and helped Stanford baseball coach Mark Marquess keep charts, record pitches and send offensive and/or defensive signals to the team.

Halfway into the Pac-12 Conference season, the group has become important contributors to the Cardinal postseason hopes.

Heading into last weekend's Arizona State series, the Cardinal bats seemed to be in hibernation, it was learned shortstop Lonnie Kauppila would miss the rest of the season with a knee injury and regular center fielder Jake Stewart would miss a few games because of a knee injury.

Enter Blandino, Doran and Diekroeger, the self-named "steal squad" who were suddenly needed in the lineup. They didn't just fill spots, they excelled.

"Things always happen," Cardinal coach Mark Marquess said. "A team can go into a slump or you can get an injury. When guys come off the bench and perform offensively and defensively like they did, it's a plus. You're always going to need a little help."

Blandino hit four home runs in three games, helping him earn National Player of the Week honors, and Stanford swept Arizona State, earning a series victory over the Sun Devils for the first time in four years.

Doran and Diekroeger also added their own offensive output, with Diekroeger hitting his first career home run. Doran was slotted into the leadoff spot and responded brilliantly.

The Cardinal (8-7, 26-10) takes a four-game winning streak into an important series at UCLA (11-7, 26-10), which begins Friday at 6 p.m.

"You need contributions from guys you don't necessarily start the season expecting to contribute," Marquess said. "We know they are talented, but you don't know how quickly that will translate at this level."

All three players also contributed to Stanford's 10-9 win over BYU on Tuesday. Doran had two hits and drove in three runs, Menlo School grad Diekroeger added two hits and made a game-saving defensive play and Blandino added a sacrifice fly.

"We all go out every day and we're always trying to get better," Doran said. "You always have to be ready and our opportunity came last weekend. At the beginning of the season we knew we weren't going to be the stars and guys who were playing ahead of us were better. At the same time, we knew we belonged at this level and when you do get the chance you have to be mentally tough and do the job you're supposed to do."

Doran, Diekroeger and Blandino are hitting a combined .368 with 30 RBI on the season, with Blandino leading the way.

"It's all happened so fast I'm still worried about being in the lineup every day," Blandino said. "We're all pumped. We were on the bench together at the start of the season, charting pitches, that kind of thing. Now that we're all playing and doing well, it's a boost for the team and for ourselves. It's exciting to see guys go in and do well. In our team-only meetings we always stress that we are here for each other."

They are giving Stanford a championship look again, as all three Cardinal players have found their niche for the ninth-ranked team in the nation.

"We have to keep it rolling," Diekroeger said. "It looks like our bats have picked up a little bit. I hope we can keep that going through Pac-12 play."

It's not limited to those three either. Justin Ringo, A.J. Vanegas, Garrett Hughes and others have made important contributions,

something that a championship team needs over the course of a long, 54-game season.

"We trust every guy," Doran said. "Whoever plays, we play for each other. Every Pac-12 series is huge. You have to bring it every day. We get beat by San Jose State and then sweep Arizona State. We had been struggling and this week we came out and scored a lot of runs."

Stanford's team batting average slipped below .300 following the series loss to Oregon, but thanks to a .381 average against the Sun Devils and the big game against BYU, the Cardinal is hitting .297.

Austin Wilson had three hits, including a home run, and drove in a career-high five runs in Stanford's win over the Cougars on Tuesday. Hughes pitched three scoreless innings, allowing one hit and striking out three, to get credit for the victory.

"We need to swing the ball well and play great defense and just battle," Wilson said of facing the Bruins this weekend. "It's going to be two great teams, two great pitching staffs. We can't chase pitches. We need to see it, hit it and do our thing."

While Stanford is currently in fourth place, 3 1/2 games separate the top eight teams in the conference.

"Man, it's pretty crazy," Wilson said. "On any given series, anyone can win. There's always a team that can beat you. You have to always play with a chip on your shoulder and keep going."

"Even if you think you're the better team, the best team doesn't always win," Marquess said. "It's the team that plays the best who wins. If you don't play well, you won't win."

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