

In Ralphie they trust

With a runner on third and one on second, Cole Davis stepped up to the plate, the Knights trailing Burnet by a score of 4-3. The Knights were two outs away from losing to their old ball coach's new team. Coach Russell Houston managed the Knights for 12 years before leaving after the 2017 season to skipper the Bulldogs. Houston coached the Knights to 228 wins and nine district championships, including seven in a row from 2010-2017.

The 2018 Knights beat Burnet 14-0 in 2018, so losing to Houston's Bulldogs in the rematch would have stung a bit. But Davis had a chance to do something about it. If the power-hitting center-fielder had thoughts of belting a game-winning three-run home run, they were soon dashed by a bunt sign from first-year McCallum head coach Brandon Grant.



Cole Davis swings at a pitch at the 2019 Alumni game, held at Northwest Park on Feb. 16, 2019. Davis blasted an RBI double off the center-field wall to reverse the momentum of the game in the varsity's favor. Photo by David Winter.

"I was kind of nervous because I had never bunted before in a

game," Davis admitted.

Despite this apprehension, Davis came through in the clutch. The junior laid down an effective safety-squeeze bunt, which hugged the baseline leading to first and drove home Jacob Masters from third with the tying run. Thanks to an errant Burnet throw home that eluded the Bulldog catcher, Richard Salinas also scored from second with the lead run on the same play. The Knights suddenly were ahead, 5-4, with a chance to end their Friday in Fredericksburg with a doubleheader sweep.

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– Junior Cole Davis

Was Davis's brilliant bunt beginner's luck or was there some other explanation why the novice bunter was able to deliver a beautiful bunt in the clutch? A team that has seven new starters and a new coaching staff also has one more new face in the dugout: it's plastic and belongs to Ralphie the rally cow, who has been helping Coach Grant's team come through in the clutch since his early days in Lago Vista.

"Ralphie is everything when we go up to bat," Davis said. "He's our good luck charm so I do think he had something to do with [the last-inning rally]."

Ralphie has been in the dugout throughout the team's torrid 7-1-1 start. You could even say Ralphie helps the team by changing the moo-mentum of games like he did against Burnett, where the Knights were trailing 4-1, and ended up winning 5-4. He was there at Northwest Park when the team needed some bovine intervention at the 2019 Alumni Baseball Game on Feb. 16 after the alums scored three runs in to the top of the first. Thanks to his influence, the varsity rallied for eight unanswered runs and an eventual, 12-10 victory over their

predecessors in blue and gray.

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– Head coach Brandon Grant

Ralphie, along with assistant coach Steve Searle, came to McCallum as a package deal from Lago Vista where the Batman and Robin of baseball coached before coming to McCallum.

“Ralphie the Rally Cow has been with me since my second year as the head coach at Lago Vista,” Grant said. “One of my players that my wife and I adopted bought it when we were at Amy’s Ice Cream one night, and the legend of Ralphie began there.”

The Burnet win was big, but it wasn’t the biggest offensive explosion that Ralphie has helped create. That distinction would have to go to a whopping 11-run second inning for Lago Vista in the regional semifinals in 2017.

In addition to being an offensive catalyst, Ralphie also unites the team according to Coach Grant.



The current varsity team huddles up before

taking the field at the 2019 Alumni game.

Photo by David Winter.

“Ralphie brings the guys together and creates energy in the dugout,” Grant said. “When the kids rally around something such as Ralphie, they truly believe that a quick pet on the head of an inflatable bouncy cow can help get a big hit or keep a rally going. He is our good luck charm.”

After the Knights took the lead with the bunt from Davis, the job was not finished. They had to protect that lead with two more innings to go. As good as Ralphie is, his arms are too short to pitch. Lucky, the team has can take care of that responsibility on its own. Pitching in relief, Ethan Vandament took to the mound and sealed the game.

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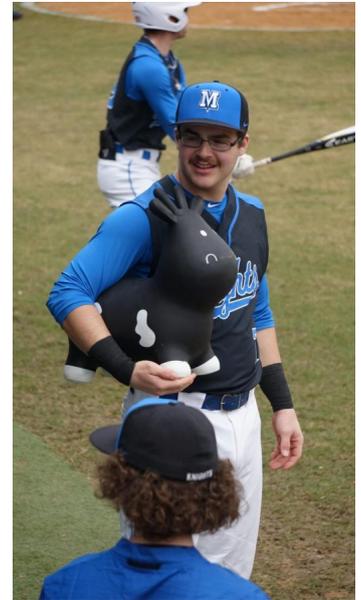
– Head coach Brandon Grant

“My mindset was to throw strikes,” Vandament said. “With my release point being from the side and the way my ball moves, it’s very hard for batters to piece me up; they’ll mostly just pop up or ground out. I was just focusing on pounding the zone.”

The Knights left Fredericksburg with three wins and a draw. While in Fredericksburg they were able to beat Wimberley 4-1 and Llano, 6-1. The team started the tournament with a tie against host Fredericksburg 6-6.

The team picked up at the AISD tournament last weekend right where they left off, winning large against Manor 7-1 and Del Valle 8-0 in the first games of the AISD tournament. They continued that success with wins over Pflugerville Connally, 3-2, and El Paso Bowie, 8-0, on Friday March 1. The team has

done so behind big plays from starting pitcher Ace Dietz and freshman phenom Diego Barraz, and strong batting from Cole Davis, Jacob Masters, Trinidad De La Garza, and Easton Salinas.



When the alums stormed to an early three-run lead, Noah Cooley brought out Ralphie to generate a sudden moo-mentum shift at the Alumni Game on Feb. 16. It worked. The varsity scored the game's next eight runs in two at-bats. Photo by David Winter

The team's winning streak came to end, however, with a 7-2 loss to Cedar Creek on Saturday March 2, in the finale of the tournament.

The Knights have completed two preseason tournaments and next face Anderson where they will renew the Taco Shack rivalry against the Knights' neighbors to the north. The game will be held at Northwest Park at 7 p.m. tomorrow. Then the season kicks into high gear with a district opener against LBJ at Northwest Park at 7 p.m. the following Tuesday, March 12.

"I'm looking forward to seeing our kids keep the energy level high and continuing to execute," Coach Grant said. "This is a really fun group of kids to coach and they compete their tails off. Our Hype Guy (senior Noah Cooley) has done an awesome job bringing the Rally Cow into the fold at McCallum. Hopefully, it will lead to many more wins ahead."

Cooley is the rally leader for this year's varsity Knights. His teammates voted him into that role. As rally leader, Cooley is Ralphie's official handler. Like his bovine brethren, Bevo at UT, Ralphie has served as a mascot for the team and a good luck charm.

"It's a good way to start getting us hyped in the dugout," Cooley said. "You rub him a little bit and he gives you the extra power to get on base and score some runs."

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Overall, Cooley was impressed with how the team started this season, with seven wins, one draw, and one loss. The tournaments, although not for count towards district rankings, allowed the new team to play its first season games.

"It felt good to get out there and play some games against some really talented teams," Cooley said. "We pitched well, we played really great defense, and our bats finally came alive

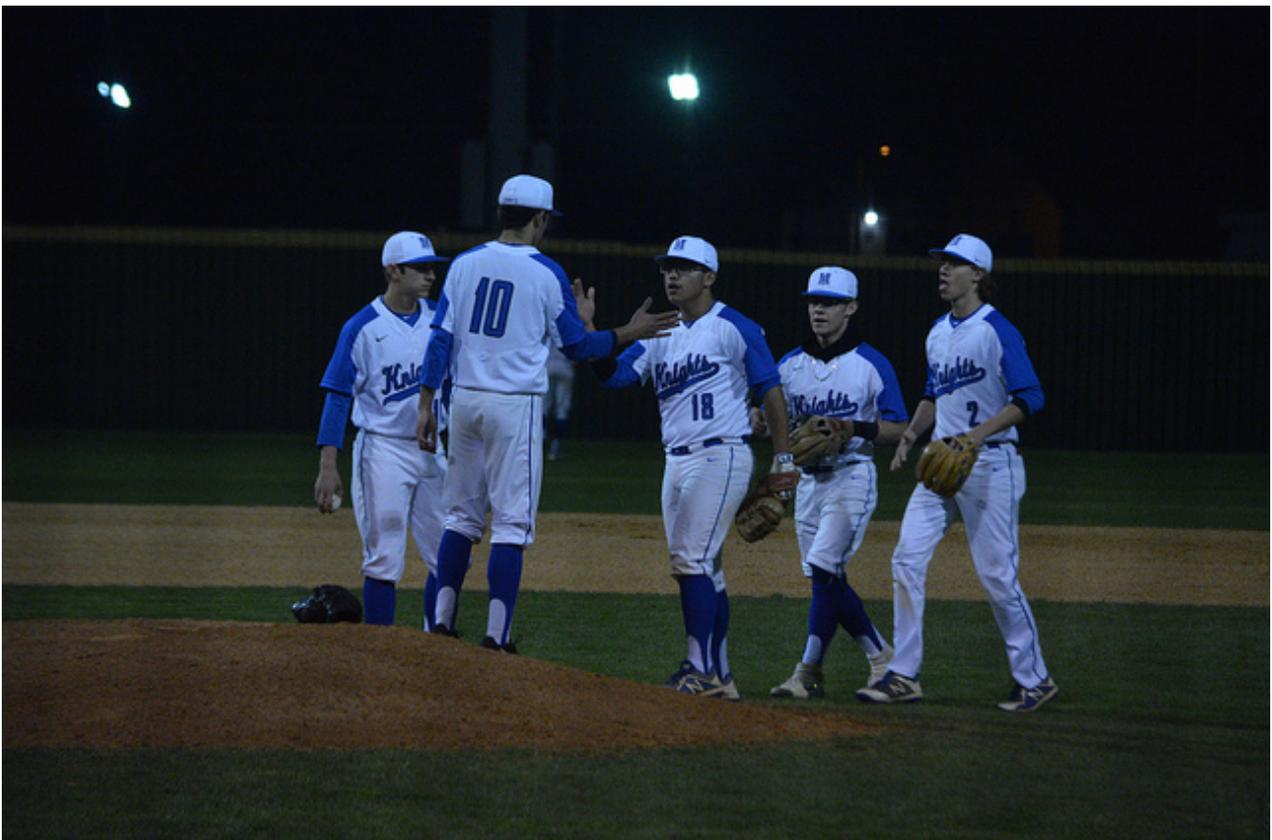
after some struggles in Fredericksburg.”

The program has had an extended streak of success: they have won eight district titles. With seven 2018 senior starters gone from last year’s varsity team, the team has experienced a major change in personnel. This includes several sophomores and juniors who played freshman or JV last year moving up to take varsity spots. Seven of the starting nine players from last weekend’s play are underclassmen.

Vandament is one of those young players, and he weighed in on continuing the proud tradition of McCallum baseball.

“I see the team maturing more from here on out,” he said. “We are a very young team, yet we are still competitive and want to carry on the winning tradition here at Mac.”

But even with all the new names all over the diamond and in the dugout, it may be that a rally-creating black cow with white spots might be the most important new addition of them all.



BEATING BOWIE: The Knights come together after defeating El Paso Bowie, 8-0, to win their third game of the AISD tournament on Friday March 2. Sophomore Yzmael Izquierido pitched a complete-game two hit shutout for the Knights' seventh consecutive victory of the season. Photo by Grace Nugent.

with reporting by Abby Salazar