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Memorial baseball off to rousing start, but missing legendary coach

Ferrainolo approaches all-time coaching win record despite battling cancer

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Early April is usually **Tony Ferrainolo's** best time of year. The high school baseball season is just getting into full swing in early spring and the veteran Memorial High School baseball coach loves the challenge that comes with a new team and a new season.

It's not the time of year where Hudson County's dean of baseball coaches expects to be away from his team, sitting in a hospital bed.

"I have been feeling great, but my doctors told me that I had to go back into the hospital for a bit to receive some more treatment," said Ferrainolo, who has been battling lymphoma for the better part of the last 18 months. "I have to put my health first. I couldn't

hold it off. I had to do it now."

So after his Tigers defeated Hoboken, 1-0, in an old-school Memorial-Hoboken pitcher's duel last Saturday, Ferrainolo checked into New York Presbyterian Hospital to receive round-the-clock chemotherapy to attack the cancer.

Ferrainolo left his team in the capable hands of assistant coaches **Jack Nagurka** and **Danny Marroquin**.

"I'll be back at the end of the week," Ferrainolo said from his hospital bed. "Jack and Danny have been in touch with me every day. Of course, it's tough for me to be away. But this team has really pushed me to get this taken care of and get back to them as soon as possible. I'll come out Friday. I'll be at the game Monday."

Ferrainolo timed his hospital stay almost perfectly, missing only games against Hudson Catholic and Kearny while he was hospitalized.

Ferrainolo has to get back to the coaching box as soon as possible. The veteran coach is now only 12 wins behind Morristown coaching legend **Harry Shatel** for the all-time New Jersey state record for coaching victories.

Ferrainolo now has 740 wins. Shatel retired four years ago with 752 victories.

With 13 wins, the state record would belong to the West New York athletic legend, honored last year when the baseball field at West New York's Miller Stadium was renamed as the Anthony Ferrainolo Field.

It's a mark that could fall this season, provided the Tigers keep playing like they have been.

"We're playing good baseball right now," Ferrainolo said. "When the pitchers go out and throw strikes and the players behind them make plays, then you have a chance to win games."

Ferrainolo likes the 1-2 pitching punch he has in seniors **Jose Toribio** and **Bryan Vizcaino**. Both hurlers have already won big games this season.

"It's nice to have two experienced guys like that," Ferrainolo said.

Toribio was destined to be the Tigers' top pitcher last year, but suffered a torn meniscus knee injury that forced him to the sidelines after only a handful of games.

"He would have given us six or seven wins last year," Ferrainolo said. "He pitched two games, but he had a torn meniscus since basketball. He tried to go out there with the knee and couldn't do it."

Toribio has come back 100 percent healthy this season and has pitched lights-out baseball, including the four-hit, 10-strikeout performance against Hoboken, a game where Toribio drove in the lone run of the contest.

"He goes out and throws strikes," Ferrainolo said. "He has a lot of confidence in his pitches now. He has a good fastball, curve and changeup. He won four games as a freshman and sophomore and having him back this year is a big plus."

Vizcaino was the Tigers' top hurler last year and has already won two games this season, including a 5-3 win over previously undefeated Hudson Catholic.

"He just has to learn that he can't get frustrated when someone makes an error behind him," Vizcaino said. "He has to know he's always going to pitch in big games."

Junior Jonathan Susini is the Tigers' No. 3 pitcher. The right-hander has already seen some quality innings as well.

Ferrainolo is very high on freshman **Jimmy Rodriguez**, who stands 6-foot-2 at age 14 and already throws very hard.

"He's going to be a very good ballplayer all around," Ferrainolo said. "He throws well. He has good size already. He's been playing a lot of third base as well and he's going to be a good hitter, hitting with some power."

Another pitcher is fellow freshman **Ruben Rivera**, whose father once played for

Ferrainolo. The left-handed Rivera also has shown a ton of promise and will play most of the time in right field when not pitching. Ferrainolo has never been shy about using freshmen and this year is no exception.

Sophomore **Alvaro Suazo** is the Tigers' starting catcher.

"He handles the pitchers well," Ferrainolo said. "At first, he was a little hesitant about throwing the ball, but he came out in the Hoboken game and was firing the ball all over the place."

Junior **Anthony Urnadeta**, the team's designated hitter last year, is the regular first baseman this season. Junior **Tyler Saurborn**, who saw a little bit of varsity action last year, starts at second base.

Shortstop duties are shared by returning seniors Toribio and Vizcaino, depending upon who is on the mound.

Rodriguez, the freshman, is getting most of the action at third, but Vizcaino can play third as well.

Junior **Jonathan Gonzalez** returns to his starting slot in left field, with junior **Jose Francisco** in center.

Ferrainolo loves singing the praises of Francisco.

"He has great speed and bats leadoff for us," Ferrainolo said. "He's also great defensively and covers a lot of ground. He has a chance to be one of the better centerfielders in the county."

In the win over Hoboken, Francisco led off the sixth inning with a single, stole second and scored on Toribio's single.

Rivera has been steady in right field.

The Tigers own a 4-1 record in the early going. Having the two solid pitchers will keep the Tigers in the hunt until the very last weekend in May.

"I really like this team," Ferrainolo said. "They're a great group of kids. They've showed a lot of enthusiasm and I like that. They are kids who want to win. It's a young team when blended with the two seniors, has a chance to be a good team. It makes for a good scenario."

And it certainly drives Ferrainolo to make his return as soon as possible.

"The way they play helps me to want to come back," Ferrainolo said.

With a state record in sight, chances are that Ferrainolo will be back coaching in his familiar habitat in the days to come. – **Jim Hague** *Jim Hague can be reached at OGSMAR@aol.com.*

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