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Shelly Leachman

Light It Up

For fans and athletes alike, few things can energize a baseball stadium like a night game. Unless, of course, that stadium lacks lights. Then what? Well, no night games.

For decades — in fact, since its inception — UC Santa Barbara's Caesar Uyesaka Stadium has been dark, night after night. Dark and empty. With no lights on their home field, the Gauchos' night game experience has occurred outside Santa Barbara.

That is all about to change.

Creating new opportunities for Gaucho baseball, for Gaucho fans and for the Santa Barbara community at large, UCSB Athletics will soon install lights at Uyesaka Stadium. A goal of the department for many years, the $1.3 million project has now been made possible through the generosity of multiple donors.

"The support we got from a key group of donors, including the Gretler Foundation and the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians Foundation, really made the difference," said UCSB Athletics Director John McCutcheon. "You need some real leadership and real vision with significant gifts to get it done and that's what we got. One led to another and then another and another, and in course of the last year we were able to put it together. All the thanks in the world go out to the donors who made it happen. This has been talked about forever and we really think it's a game changer — literally."

Said Paul Graziano, president of the Gretler Foundation, which is among the funders of the effort, “The Gretler Foundation is proud to support a project that benefits not only UCSB Baseball, but all UCSB students and the entire Santa Barbara community.”

Indeed, a seemingly simple thing like lights will have wide-ranging impacts — especially on the baseball program — from scheduling, training and game preparation to game attendance and even competitive edge. First and foremost, said head baseball coach Andrew Checketts, the long-sought improvement will benefit student-athletes.

“It increases our flexibility in terms of class schedules and practice times, and gives us the chance to train under artificial light and acclimate to it before we compete,” said Checketts, the team’s coach for seven years. “It also provides an opportunity for our student-athletes to really showcase their skills and talents to the community and their peers. Lights do that by allowing us to play at a later time, when people in the community can come watch us play. It’s entertainment, too. We want to be able to provide a game day experience that is on par with our competitors. Cal Poly, Irvine, Long Beach, Fullerton — they have fans in the stands, that environment and energy. Having lights will allow us to do that.”

And not only that. Lights are a central NCAA requirement for teams hoping to earn a hosting slot for regional tournaments. Currently, the Gauchos’ “home” field for hosting regionals is at Lake Elsinore, nearly 200 miles from campus. Illuminating their actual home field at Uyesaka Stadium is a key milestone.

“We’re really hopeful that this is the first domino that starts a cascade,” Checketts said. “It should be, because this helps us to get more people into the stadium and allows us to showcase our student-athletes and the product on the field more effectively. The hope is that this domino allows us to continue to raise funds to make our facility on par with those of other teams in the Big West that we compete against. Lights won’t get us all the way there, but it gets us going in the right direction.”

“This definitely gives us momentum,” agreed McCutcheon, who has a wishlist of projects not only for baseball, but that spans most of athletics.

The department is on a roll under McCutcheon (he joined UCSB in 2015), in recent years alone installing a new floor and new scoreboard in the Thunderdome,

upgrading soccer practice fields and strength and conditioning equipment, and adding new office space for academic advising in the Intercollegiate Athletics Building. Long-eyed enhancements to the track are finally complete, and UCSB in late April will host a track meet for the first time in a decade.

“If you look at our facilities against those of our competitors, we’re not where we need to be,” said McCutcheon. “But one thing our competitors can’t duplicate is this campus and where we are as a university — that’s the strongest thing we have going for us. As we make more improvements in other areas specific to sports and athletics, it has that much more of an impact. We’re going to keep at it. This is a great place. It’s a great place for student-athletes to come and get a great education and to have a quality athletic experience as well. We hope it gets more exciting from here.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.