

# Coach's hustle at heart of Vanderbilt's success

By Tom Weir

NASHVILLE — As a child, Vanderbilt baseball coach Tim Corbin knew his little sister would ignore his requests to fetch him a cookie. But if he challenged her to bring it in 10 seconds, she would respond with a race against the clock.

That understanding of motivation is at the core of everything Corbin does with his Vanderbilt Commodores, the nation's No. 1-ranked team.

Corbin is obsessed with charts and stopwatches.

He times how quickly his team gets off the field after the third out, how rapidly it gets to home plate to congratulate each Commodore who scores and also how fast the ball is thrown around the infield after an opponent strikes out.

"Some say that's false hustle, but I don't care," says Corbin, who often sleeps on the pullout sofa bed in his office. "I want pace, and I want tempo."

Vanderbilt's rate of compiling victories is meeting that standard. With a March 9-11 sweep of Illinois-Chicago, the Commodores are off to an 18-0 start, the best in school history. In 10 of those victories, Vanderbilt has overcome a deficit.

The lineup includes two players with the potential to be the No. 1 overall pick in future drafts.

Left-handed pitcher David Price is 4-0 and has four consecutive starts with double-figure strikeout totals. In 35 $\frac{2}{3}$  innings, the 6-5 junior has amassed 57 strikeouts. In his last start March 9, Price had 16 strikeouts.

In a 13-strikeout complete game a week before, one Xavier hitter's aluminum bat cracked in half against a Price fastball.

"I don't think I've ever seen one split in half like that," says Vanderbilt pitching coach Derek Johnson, who says once the weather warms his ace consistently will hit 95-96 mph.

Price's 2.52 ERA is actually the highest of the four starters, who are a combined 14-0 through March 11. Nick Christiani has a 2.05 ERA; Mike Minor, 2.21; and Brett Jacobson, 2.33.

Leading the offensive production is Pedro Alvarez, a Dominican-born third baseman who hits left-handed and who turned down an offer of nearly \$1 million to sign with the Red Sox out of high school.

Alvarez is off to a .429 start as a sophomore, with seven home runs in 18 games and an .844 slugging percentage. Last season he was selected as the freshman of the year by *Baseball America*, *Collegiate Baseball* and *Rivals.com*.

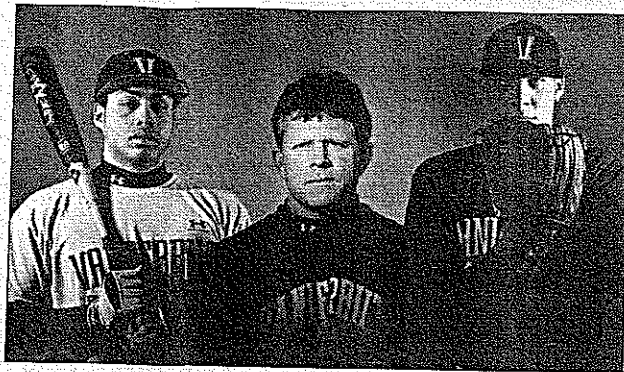
Alvarez grew up in a low-income New York family, and Corbin knew chances to recruit him were slim.

"He had a tryout at Yankee Stadium with the Yankees, and frankly I thought we were going to lose him because he was hitting balls into the upper deck and out to the monuments," Corbin says.

But Alvarez's father, Pedro Sr., a taxi driver, instilled his son with educational values. He attended Horace Mann, a highly regarded private high school, instead of George Washington, a public school whose professional alumni include Manny Ramirez.

"You see where he's coming from, and I asked myself whether I could really look him in the eye and say the best decision was to come to Vanderbilt," Corbin says.

"I thought it was. I'm not an Amway dealer, I'm selling education. . . . I just feel we're selling an Ivy league-type education with a Southeastern



By Jae S. Lee, *The (Nashville) Tennessean*

**Champs:** Tim Corbin, center, coached the U.S. team, including Pedro Alvarez, left, and David Price, to a world championship.

Conference baseball education, and I feel those are two things that are hard to come by."

Corbin came to Vanderbilt in 2003, the season Vanderbilt had the last of its six consecutive losing seasons. Since then the Commodores are 162-95. In 2004 Vanderbilt made its first NCAA tournament appearance in 24 years.

Last summer Corbin managed the USA Baseball national team to a 28-2-1 record that ended with a gold medal at the world university championship in Cuba.

Price and Alvarez were major factors in the championship. Price went 5-1 with a 0.20 ERA and 61 strikeouts in 44 innings. Alvarez led the team with a .379 average and had five homers and 43 RBI.

Also on the U.S. team was Vanderbilt closer Casey Weathers, a converted outfielder who has clocked 99 mph and who had 17 strikeouts in nine innings.

In batting practice, Alvarez has shattered one windshield of a car parked in the lot beyond Vanderbilt's right-field wall and threatens to break plenty more.

"There's a sign out there that says, 'Park at your own risk,'" Alvarez says.

Alvarez's hitting has been helped by having Ryan Flaherty, a .394-hitting shortstop, batting cleanup behind him.

"I tell people Flaherty might be our most valuable player," Corbin says. "If he doesn't hit behind Pedro, Pedro doesn't see strike one, he's such a good hitter."

Flaherty's father, Ed, has won two national championships as the head coach at Division III Southern Maine and was inducted into the American Baseball Coaches Association Hall of Fame in 2004.

But even after years of watching his father's teams work out, Flaherty says he had never seen a team practice the way Vanderbilt's does.

"When I got here and I watched his first practice, I thought he was crazy," Flaherty says of Corbin. "He times everything."

His players need to get off the field in eight seconds after the final out.

The ball needs to get around the infield in less than six seconds after an opponent's strikeout.

During the warm-up between innings, his catcher's throw down to second had better not be any slower than 2.05 seconds.

Corbin concedes, "Some pro people probably come here and say it's rah-rah, and that's fine."

But, he adds, "These guys will have their days professionally, and then they can walk out on the field if they want, and that would make me puke. But they're not going to do it here. I want to see guys with energy and smiles."