

Softball team is singing a new tune

Written by Austin Benson

Thursday, 22 August 2013 14:35 - Last Updated Thursday, 22 August 2013 15:24



Losing a four-year starting pitcher and five of his top nine hitters, Swede softball coach Roger Neujahr could be forgiven for thinking success this season might be too high a hill to climb.

Neujahr is singing a different tune though.

“There ain’t a mountain that we can’t climb,” Neujahr said, paraphrasing the lyrics of a song made famous by Marvin Gaye that is the theme song for this year’s Swede team. “We are going to try to get better every day and every game.”

He pointed to the spirit displayed at a team meeting last spring.

“It was the kind of group that said ‘We’re not scared of work and we’re going to do the best we can,’” he said. “That’s kind of how we came up with our theme song.”

Even with the losses of key players, the cupboard isn’t bare. Gothenburg returns several solid hitters including senior Kyndal Holmes who set a team record with a .500 batting average last season.

Throw in senior Emily Franzen, a .434 hitter last year, and juniors Becca Riley and Ashley Eskew, and Gothenburg has a good foundation to build a solid offensive squad.

“We do feel by the end of the year we’re going to be a real good offensive team,” he said.

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Question marks do appear on the defensive side of the field, though, where key starters need to be replaced at pitcher, catcher, the middle infield and one outfield position.

Riley has the third base spot locked down. "Her fielding has just been tremendous," the coach said. He also noted Franzen is solid at first base.

The rest of the spots are up for grabs with competition close for several roles.

"We may spend the first half of the season where a kid may spend two innings in one position and the next two innings in another position trying to find out who is best at shortstop and catcher and pitcher and second base and whatever," Neujahr said. "We've got kids that are at those positions now who we think are going to be good ballplayers."

An obvious need is at pitcher to replace four-year starter Amanda Barkmeier. Senior Rebecca Anderson has been seeing action there as she recovers from a head injury during the summer. "Karleigh Kleinknecht has looked good," the coach said. "Morgan Cardeñas got quite a few innings (on the mound) this summer.

"Pitching is key in fast pitch softball. That will be a big test for us."

The Minden Whippets may be the chief obstacle for Gothenburg to return to the state tournament.

"Minden had a young pitcher last year," Neujahr said. "She worked over the winter with a pitching coach in Kearney and he told me she's looking pretty good."

Former Cozad Haymaker Melanie Nutt is the new coach of the Whippet program.

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Other teams in Gothenburg's district include Chase County, Blue Hill, Chadron and Southern Valley.

Non-district foes that appear headed for good seasons, according to Neujahr, include Grand Island Northwest and McCook, both Class B teams.

A rule interpretation change may be confusing for softball fans. Players in the batter's box do not have to attempt to get out of the way of a pitch and can still receive a free pass to first if hit by a pitched ball.

"I don't know how every umpire is going to interpret that," the Swede coach said.

The Gothenburg squad has 23 players, the most ever in the team's nine-year history.

The Swedes open the season Thursday with a home contest against Southern Valley. Gothenburg entertains McCook Friday.

Members of the team include (*denotes returning letterwinners):

Seniors—Rebecca Anderson, Emily Franzen*, Kyndal Holmes*

Juniors—Ashley Eskew*, Kyann LeViner, Haley Meyers, Becca Riley*, Kyrsten Russell, Kerry Wellmann, Tanisha Winter

Sophomores—Kylee Beyea*, Morgan Cardeñas, Katlin Harm*, Haley Juarez, Callie Poorman

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Freshmen—Kaitlyn Aden, Ebony Anderson, Josee Hotz, Karleigh Kleinknecht, Kylie Koehler, Cassidy Kottwitz, Kasey Wellmann, Bryse Young.