

Lady Bulldogs count on youth

BY DARRON PATTERSON
Sports Correspondent

MOBILE — UMS-Wright softball coach Mike Blaylock hasn't played chess since middle school, but he just studied up on a few tips from that age-old game in which positioning of your pieces means everything.

You see, Blaylock has a very talented class of sophomore players, but he's got to figure out just where to play them all so they're most effective.

"We've got players, but we're going to have to play some solid defense this year," said Blaylock, entering his fourth season as the Lady Bulldogs' coach. "We're young, still, but it's going to take a solid defense and a continually progressive offense to have success.

"We've been doing well offensively, but we've got to be able to hold some other people down from scoring runs. We definitely want to win the area title first. We've been in a very tough area the past two years. My first year we won the area title and the past two years have been tough."

With lone senior Lauren Hinton set to play multiple positions again this season and junior Natalie Hurdle tabbed as the pitching ace, Blaylock is counting on a bevy of sophomores to help them out — as soon as he figures out their best positions, that is.

"Lauren is the key to where everybody else will play when she comes in to pitch," he said. "But Natalie will



Lauren Hinton

be our number one pitcher, although she's usually our shortstop. So what I need to happen is for the defense to step up when we pull her off shortstop.

"Some other girls are going to have to step up to help our defense out."

Katie Holston (P/CF), Emma Hwang (pronounced Wong) at catcher and first base, and Bailey Weaver (3B, 2B, SS) are just three of those sophomores who'll need to produce in the field and at the plate if the Bulldogs hope to improve on last season's 14-13 record. UMS was eventually ousted by Thomasville in the Class 4A, Area 1 tourney.

This year, W.S. Neal, Escambia County and Williamson join the realigned area, but Blaylock says he is optimistic.

"We have a good group," he says. "If we can hold some people in check, and get our offense going to produce the runs we'll be OK."

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kind of hoping that the experience they got against good competition will pay off for us this year," said Raley. "We've got a handful of some really good kids."

Senior shortstop Skipper Snypes returns for his third year at the varsity level, while junior third baseman John Rice will also see action on the mound. Senior outfielders Mitchell Hall and Tyler Irvin will also be heavily counted on, with Irvin also splitting time behind the plate at catcher.

Meanwhile, Raley is also looking to junior outfielder-pitcher Richard Brinson and senior first baseman-pitcher Gary Beasley to provide leadership as the Bulldogs look to right the ship.

"We've got quite a few kids we're counting on to have a successful year."

And what's his philosophy as they try to improve on a 17-12 season?

"Accept roles," he said. "We have an eight-man pitching rotation. We have

kids that pitch and also play other positions. As the season gets going and the rotation gets set, there's also a rotation (to develop) in the lineup.

"Sometimes a certain kid won't play every single game. They may play once every three games, or every two games, and that's their role. We ask them to contribute when we ask them to. We just need everybody to be ready. Everybody practices the same and hopefully we'll be prepared.

"We're looking for more consistent play. For years previously we were fairly consistent, but last year we had some peaks and valleys. Sometimes we'd win five in a row, then lose three in a row. We just never seemed to get real consistent as the year went on, just go out and play that good solid game of baseball every time we go out. If you do that in the game of baseball you have a chance to be successful."

Raley says unlike football and basketball, getting off to a fast start isn't all that critical in baseball. Instead,

he says, developing chemistry is most important.

"We play a really tough schedule," said Raley. "We play a lot of really good baseball teams. We have maybe 16 games before we start area play. So we'll be looking at who's going to be the top three guys in the rotation, and formalize the order a little bit.

"It gives us the opportunity to kind of figure out where we are and what we have. That gives us a better chance as coaches to come up with a plan."

The Bulldogs travel to Jackson, Miss., the first weekend in March, where they'll play American Christian from Tuscaloosa and Florence at Pearl High School on Friday, then play Mississippi big boys Warren Central and Madison Central on Saturday.

"When you come back from there after that four-game weekend you'll find out a lot about yourself," said Raley. "Every team you play up there is top notch."