

Bryant plans playoff return

BY ROBERT LADNIER
Sports Correspondent

After losing 10 seniors following a trip to the Class 7A state quarterfinals last season, one might think the Alma Bryant baseball team would be looking at hard times for 2019.

Not so fast, says Hurricanes' head coach Brian Ladnier.

"We are a real heavy senior-laden team, with only a couple of juniors, but they've had some significant playing time," Ladnier said. "We have eight seniors this year. We have quite a few returning ... and we will lean on their experience and hopefully make it to the playoffs again."

Bryant finished 23-11 in 2018 and won Class 7A, Area 1.

"This group of seniors is pretty focused," Ladnier explained. "They are mature, they get their work done and they want to be successful. They have been getting their reps in hitting, throwing and hitting the weights during the offseason. They motivate themselves and are fun to coach."

Pitching and defense may be the keys to success for the 'Canes.

"Last year we were solid on defense down the stretch and we had a couple of juniors to step up on the mound," Ladnier said.

Senior Gary Ewing (.300 batting average, 27 RBI), a four-year starter who has committed to Alabama Southern, will

play several significant roles.

"He is a pitcher, shortstop and third baseman and he will catch some, too," Ladnier said. "He is very versatile."

Another utility player is senior Tyler Darby (.324 BA, 20 RBI), who will see action on the mound as well as third base and first base.

"He will pitch a lot and he has a lot of experience," Ladnier said. "He stays around the plate and gives us a chance to win."

Ladnier designates the duo of Ewing (7-2, 2.08 ERA) and Darby (4-2, 2.45 ERA) as pitchers 1A and 1B.

Senior A.J. Blackwell (.320 BA, 25 RBI) will also be expected to make a big contribution.

"He is our center fielder who moved from left field," Ladnier said. "He hit .350 from the No. 9 hole but will be our leadoff hitter this season. He is the sparkplug of our offense and is solid at center fielder with good arm strength."

According to Ladnier, despite a roster being heavy with upperclassmen — including Jarvis Phillips, Austin White, Jevon Jackson, Hunter Anderson and Lane Sprinkle — several freshmen will also see playing time this year.

Ladnier described his team as a good group of kids.

"They are always where they are supposed to be and doing what they are supposed to do," Ladnier said. "That makes life easier. Their expectations are to get back where we were last year and get another shot at things. They have put in the work to do it and I can see it paying off. They want to go out with a bang."



Tyler Darby

Hurricane girls coming of age

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For the Alma Bryant softball team, head coach Meghan Trehern is counting on increased maturity leading to better results on the diamond as the Hurricanes face strong Class 7A, Area 1 competition this season.

"For the past few years we've been younger, but finally we have more upperclassmen," Trehern said. "We have a good corps of juniors and sophomores who have played since the seventh and eighth grades. We should be able to compete better defensively and in hitting. I am expecting a lot better results since they have varsity experience."

Junior center fielder Madi Graham (.351 batting average) will set the table for the team at the plate.

"She is our leadoff hitter and a real go-getter," Trehern explained. "No matter where I play her she will play to the best of her ability. She covers the most ground in the outfield and will dive for the ball."

Senior second baseman Melody Thornsberry (.872 fielding percentage) is one who should provide leadership.

"She has been a staple in our defense," Trehern said. "She is a big bat, a power hitter and we look for her to go out on top of things."

Junior utility player Morgan Byrd (.270 BA, .958 FP) is also of great value.

"She will play middle infield and outfield, depending on who we pitch," Trehern said. "She does a great job on defense and will come through in the clutch as a hitter."

On the mound, sophomore Laken Firth (3-1, 4.17 ERA) has been a starter since seventh grade.

"Laken does a good job getting ahead in the count and will pitch so our defense can get ground balls," Trehern said.

Offensively, Trehern is looking for the team to score at key moments.

"Last year the best part for the team was probably hitting," Trehern said.

"Every now and then we would have good results batting with runners in scoring position (.355 RISP).

"We are not a big power-hitting team, so we must play small ball and string runs together. We are gap-to-gap hitters. It's been a while since we had players who could hit the long ball. We have had to be a scrappy team for the past three years."

According to Trehern, the pitching staff will see a lot of action this year with Firth sharing time with Kayla Shish and Mandalyn Cannon.

"They are all mature and all saw varsity action last year," Trehern said. "We look for them to do a good job on the mound. There will be a lot of pitching by committee, with closers coming in like in baseball."

Trehern expects the defense to be tough. "We are really strong in the outfield and the middle infield is seasoned with juniors and seniors," Trehern said. "They do a good job limiting errors."