



John Neutze slides into second base in a cloud of dust in action last season. He hit .327 for St. Luke's and the sophomore will be one of the leaders for this spring's edition of the Wildcats.

St. Luke's loses Jackson but has plenty returning

BY TOMMY HICKS
tommyhicks@thecallnews.com

There will be quite a notable absence in the St. Luke's baseball lineup this season as all-state selection Jeremiah Jackson, who was the No. 57 overall pick by the Los Angeles Angels in the 2018 Major League Baseball draft, will be playing professionally this season.

Jackson was the Wildcats' shortstop and one of its key pitchers and was a huge threat on the base paths as a runner. He hit at the top of the lineup and made things happen. Head coach Mike Szymanski must now go to a committee of players to seek to fill those needs this season.

Yet even without Jackson, St. Luke's is a team that, as it did last season in Class 2A play, should be a contender at the area, regional and state level now as a member of Class 1A.

"We won the area last year in Area 1 of Class 2A and we lost in the semifinals of the state playoffs," Szymanski said. "In Game 3 we lost 13-11 to G. W. Long and they went on to win the state. We dropped to Class 1A and I don't think it will be easy. It's going to be difficult because you've got to deal with Millry and you have to deal with Sweet Water and Mars Hill Bible and those folks, but we should be OK. We have six returning starters so we should be in pretty good shape."

The loss to Long still stings. In the best-of-three series, Long intentionally walked Jackson – even in his first at-bat as a leadoff hitter – 11 of the 13 times he came to the plate in an effort to prevent him from hitting home runs and driving in runs that could have led to a loss for Long.

"If they let him swing we probably win hands down," Szymanski said.

But that was last year. Now the Wildcats are in Class 1A,

but they are chasing the same goal. They have several key players returning who should be counted on to lead that effort.

The list includes Trey Bunch, who hit .330 last year. The junior "should be one of our better hitters," Szymanski said. "He'll play first base and we'll also use him as a left-handed pitcher."

A pair of sophomores, Josh Neutze and Bryce Eddington, will also help. "Bryce hit .305 and played middle infield and pitched; and then I have Josh. who hit .327; he's going to play middle infield and pitch.

"We've got some other kids coming back. We'll be young, though we have a few seniors mixed in. There's no Jeremiah Jackson, but I feel good about this bunch, we're just going to have to work hard and things will have to happen for us to come together and win and get in the playoffs."

The experience gained through last season will be a plus for the Wildcats this time around.

"This bunch is the same one that scored 11 runs (in Game 3 of the state semifinals) without Jeremiah (who was walked when he came to the plate)," Szymanski said. "You score 11 and most of the time you're going to win, we just gave up 13. I think defense will be a strong point. We'll play good defense and we'll have to score and manufacture some runs.

"Hopefully the pitching staff can come through. We've got seven pitchers coming back — all of our guys pitched last year and all of them pitched in the playoffs. Now, we lost our top three pitchers from last year (including Brady Garcia and Jackson). But we've got to play defense and we have to get people out and then scratch out a few runs."