

Young group of Lions look to bounce back from disappointing 2015 season

By MIKE COURSON

Expectations are always high for the Lyons High baseball team, and why not? Prior to last season, the Lions won back-to-back Central Kansas League titles and played in two Class 3A state tournaments. But Lyons lost a big senior class in 2014, and an even bigger class in 2015, meaning the 2016 Lions will be young.

"We're going to be young, and not necessarily inexperienced, but we have a team that's never had to carry the load," said LHS Coach Larry Kirkhart. "They've always expected the other guys to be the leaders."

Kirkhart had coached last year's seniors since they were eight and nine years old playing summer ball. That group helped turned the team around with back-to-back 18-win seasons and two regional titles. Last year as seniors, the group turned in a disappointing 11-10 season.

"Last year was their senior year and we wondering if they could step up and do it and we went 11-10," Kirkhart said. "It was a disappointing for the quality and inexperience because they'd been four-year starters."

There are some big losses from last year. Grady Kirkhart was a four-year player and last year's No. 1 starter. He is now a red-shirt freshman at Hutchinson Community College. Dakota Nave was big behind the plate and on the mound before graduating and signing with Barton Community College. Jake Buckman was a multi-year starter in the outfield turned ace on the mound, and Mitch-

ell Vincent was a multi-year infielder and another strong arm. The speedy Eddie Landeros is gone from second base.

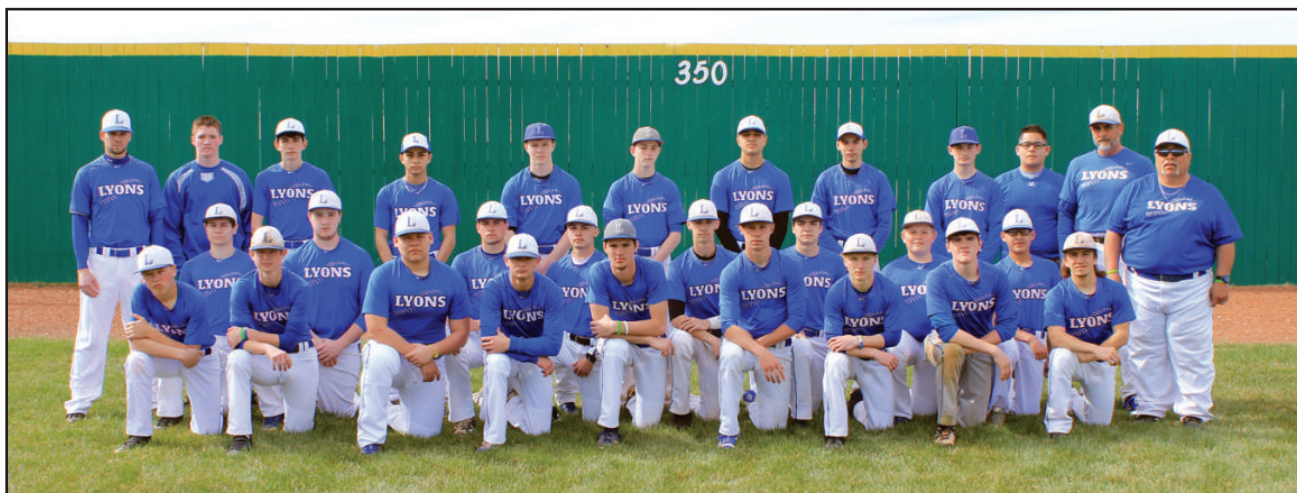
Senior Jordan Douglas returns after a solid 5-1 season last year. He threw 32 innings, striking out 20 and allowing 28 hits. He allowed just seven earned runs all year and carried a 2.21 ERA. Douglas was cruising to a 6-0 record but lost a 2-0 battle in regional play, only after his offense failed to capitalize with the bases loaded three different times.

Douglas took a break from the batting line-up on pitching days last year. This year with some experience needed, he is expected to be a full-time member on offense.

Kirkhart does return his top-two bats from last year in juniors Tyler Edwards and Riley Kirkhart. Edwards will also compete for the track team in spite of an increased role on the baseball team. He is expected to move into the No. 2 pitching spot and play first base on non-pitching days. Offensively, Edwards led the team with a .328 average last season.

Riley Kirkhart played some shortstop last season and is expected to return there again as a key contributor on both sides of the ball. He was second on the squad with a .292 average last season.

Senior Drake Link is the other player with serious varsity experience. Last season he played in the outfield but will transition to a utility role in 2016, playing on the left side of the infield or maybe even moving behind the plate. He



The Lyons High baseball team is, front row from left: Wendell Scobee, Nathan Robl, Moises Ortiz, Drake Link, Jesse Hursey, Ryan Pray, Blaine Shea, and Jordan Douglas. Middle row: Brendon Clark, Brayden Moore, Tyler Edwards, Tristan Heath, Grady Kirkhart, Bryan Pina, Brandon McClure, and Hugo Fuentes. Back row: Coach Adam Niedens, Dakota Procopio, Randy Pray, Brandon Ortiz, Tyler Pilcher, Chris Goans, Ethan Saenz, Brandon Kirk, Zane Jaime, Manuel Moreno, Coach Larry Kirkhart, and Coach Manuel Viramontez.

(photo by Vickie Folck)

may also close out some games on the mound. Link batted .261 last year.

Kirkhart said Tristan Heath has been the most-improved player through the first few weeks of practice. He will move around as a pitcher, catcher, and second baseman.

"His bat will be in the lineup," Kirkhart said. "He's played a lot of

years. I'm thinking he's matured into being able to compete."

Elsewhere down the roster, senior Ryan Pray returns after picking up some varsity experience in the outfield last season. Senior Blaine Shea had to pick up the game last year as a first-year player from Sterling. Doubling as a trackster, his speed will come in handy in the

center field spot.

Chase junior Justin Oberle has been a valuable base runner for the Lions in seasons past. He will again bring his smarts to the base paths

and will likely see time on the mound and at second base. Junior Nathan Robl will be another

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