

Larned Indians’ baseball tradition on the rise in 2016

By MIKE GILMORE
With six returning starters – including three all-staters -- in the lineup, their first regional trophy in six years and a win over a perennial state champion in last year’s Class 4A tournament, it appears that the Larned Indians baseball team’s star is on the rise.

But head coach Chad Erway knows that to build a program, slow progress is lasting progress. That means putting everything the Tribe has built so far into the 2015-16 season.

“We’re becoming known as a quality baseball team,” said Erway as the Indians spent a blustery week of practice in an intra-squad World Series style faceoff at Moffet Stadium. “We know that other teams will be saving their number one and number two pitchers for us. We know they will be gunning for us. I also know that we have the experience to get it done.”

“We’re confident, but we aren’t taking anything for granted. It took a lot of work to get us to this point, but we’re not going to be taking anything for granted.”

Six years ago, Erway saw potential in a class of ballplayers suiting up for Larned’s youth summer league Purple Panthers team. Moffet Stadium, the community’s oldest and most prized sports

venue, underwent a makeover from backstop to warning track, culminating in last year’s refit of the stadium’s dressing room. Erway the motivator had a vintage photo of the Indians blown up to life size and overlaid with the Tribe’s most recent diamond successes heading into the 21st century.

The infield is already greening up in anticipation of the Indians’ May hosting of a Class 3A regional tournament. The Tribe is back in the 3A bracket, which curiously is where they started their six-year journey to last year’s Topeka appearance with a Class 3A regional championship in 2009, on a Cinderella 8-16 record.

Larned’s baseball tradition is in resurgence as well. The Tribe will sport two American Legion teams this summer. There’s a seventh grade team, two sixth-grade teams and two fourth grade teams all itching to take the field.

This season, senior all-staters Isiah Perez, Evan Skelton and Landon Erway will be leading the Tribe from the mound. Last year workhorse Perez tirelessly led the squad to a regional championship on 504 pitches thrown through 32 innings, including 108 in a 5-2 title win over former longtime MSAA rival Russell with eight strikeouts added to a pre-state total of 43 and an earned

run average of 2.84. Skelton, meanwhile, had the Central Kansas League on their heels, going 5-0 through 24 regular-season innings with an ERA of 0.29. Skelton’s mound appearances were short, with dominating run-runs until the state tournament.

Erway, the squad’s number three hurler, was also 5-0 heading into the Topeka tilt, with 18 Ks and three walks, with an ERA of 2.52.

Junior Johnathan Herter, junior Gage Skelton and sophomore Alex Barger all squared off against the Great Bend Panthers in the Indians’ regular-season ending varsity split twinbill after touring with the JV. This season, they are in the varsity bullpen.

Herter will double at first base, Skelton at third and Barger in the outfield.

With ace Perez on the mound, the Indians’ opening infield will look this way: catcher, Carson Smith; Herter, first base; Evan Skelton, second base; Erway, shortstop; Gage Skelton, third base. Barger will be taking center field in the early going, as the squad moves the first six weeks of the season waiting on wheels-up baserunner and center fielder Mason Schartz to recover from an arm injury picked up during basketball season.



2016 Larned Indian baseball team

Left and right field will be staffed on rotation, for now.

And also, for now, catching will be done by committee, depending on who’s on the mound.

It’s hard to replace a catcher, the defensive captain. And doubly hard to replace a catcher like

all-stater Tyler Stelter, who led last year’s offense with a .500 hitting percentage, 25 RBI and six doubles.

“Catcher is heart and soul of a team. He’s the captain of the defense and the motivator. Tyler was all of those,” Erway noted. “We’re going to replace Tyler by committee for now; Carson Smith is going to catch while Izzy is on the mound, Gage is going to rotate in as catcher, Evan and Landon are going to catch, too. It’s an important position.”

Last season, the Tribe trotted out to the theme song “Load the Bases,” by Whiskey Falls. During the regular season, it took a while, the first three innings or so, to load them. This year, the Indians are embracing their ability to play “small ball,” Erway

said.

“In high school, with only 20 games on the schedule, it sometimes takes awhile to find the timing, the rhythm,” Erway said. “We don’t hit the long ball. We’re going to counter that will being really aggressive on the basepaths; hit and run, chipping away. Fortunately for us, other teams are going to be in the same boat. That’s going to be our recipe for success.”

The Indians open on the road, facing the “H’s” of the Central Kansas League in Haven (April 5) in Halstead (April 8) hosting Hoisington (April 12) and Lyons (April 15).

“We’re going to hit the ground running. That’s the goal. But lately, we’ve also been pretty good at making comebacks,” Erway said.

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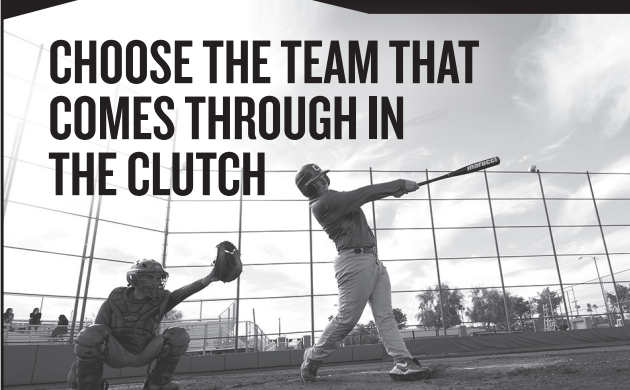
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