

Cover story: Ellinwood softball seeking trip back to state finals

By MIKE COURSON
The Lady Eagle softball team has posted a 38-7 record over the past two seasons. With several players back from last year's team that made a run to the Class 2-1A state championship, coach Jason Duvall is cautiously optimistic for another big season.

"We're going to come out and take this year as just another year," he said. "Fortunately, we have players back from last year's team that fared really well, but we're still addressing this year's team as the 2017 team that hasn't done anything yet."

"We're going to approach the season like that. We're not going to talk too much about last year and kind of downplay that a little bit. This is a new team. We do have some expectations of games we should win, games that are going to be battle, and ones that we're going to have to play perfectly to win. We just have to take it one game at a time."

Duvall had already lost Laura Standlee, Katie Shafer, and Mattie Shafer to graduation. Brynlee Baker will forego her senior season for the Lady Eagles. Those will be key losses as each of those players played in at least 21 games last year. The Shafers accounted for a fourth of the team's hits and 38 RBIs.

Out of the leadoff spot, Standlee was fourth on the team with 27 runs scored.

Ellinwood's returning firepower begins in the circle with senior Allison Panning. A lights-out pitcher in each of the past two seasons, Panning finished her junior campaign with a 19-2 record and 1.58 ERA. She struck out 190 batters in 137 innings of work.

"I think she's going to be a lot more confident this year going into games after having some success the last two years," Duvall said. "I think her expectations of herself might be a little bit more. She knows what she can do and will be able to handle some criticism and praise. I think she'll be more mature."

Offensively, Brittney Beck returns as the team leader. As a junior at third base, she led the team in average (.507), hits (34), RBIs (35), doubles (8) and home runs (4).

Beck, Panning, and senior Katelyn Robinson will likely occupy the power spots in the lineup. Panning batted .333 last year with 13 RBIs and 19 runs scored. Robinson batted .302 with seven RBIs.

With Standlee missing from the top of the order, Duvall expects junior Kaitlyn Pohlman to take over. Pohlman batted .302 last spring but reached base in nearly half her at bats.



The 2017 Ellinwood softball team is, front row from left: Jenna Oelke, Kaitlyn Pohlman, Kaitlyn Panning, and Lauren Petz. Back row: Allison Panning, Brittney Beck, Katelyn Robinson, Jackie Scheuerman, Emilie Magner, Kennedy Harrington, and Macy Munson. (photo by Mike Courson)

Senior Jenna Oelke will stay in the No. 2 spot after batting .406 last season with 26 hits, 11 RBIs, and a team-high 32 runs scored.

Freshman Kennedy Harrington and sophomore Lauren Petz will follow up the power hitters, and freshman Kaitlyn Panning and sophomore Macy Munson will likely round out the batting order.

Defensively, Duvall will likely use Harrington as Baker's replacement at first base. That ties his hands a little in the outfield, and he expects

Pohlman to move around at center and left depending on how the batters are handling Panning's pitches. Robinson and Munson will likely play the other outfield spots.

Beck returns to third and Oelke will again play at short. Petz is likely to become a permanent fixture at second base. Katelyn Panning will anchor the infield behind the plate.

"She's actually done pretty well so far in practice," Duvall said of his freshman catcher. "We'll see how that goes (in

practice) with some batters live-hitting, but she's done pretty well."

Allison Panning could get some relief in the circle via Pohlman and Petz. The duo combined for eight innings of work last year though Pohlman threw for just two outs.

"They've thrown before, so throughout the season if we have the

opportunity to get them an inning or two to throw some balls," Duvall said. "All I'm looking for is them to throw strikes."

Ellinwood has plenty of winnable games on its schedule but will be tested early against the likes of Spearville and Ellis in the first two weeks of the season. A pair of games at TMP on April 20 highlight the schedule.

Mostly, everyone is ready to play after last year's exciting finish.

"I think they're excited to be here," Duvall said. "I'm coming in with the same attitude that this is a new group. We have to get some camaraderie between one another and understand each other. It's always new every year to have new kids, whether it's one or four or five."

"For me, I always enjoy it. I'm always going to make sure, as a coach, I'll put some pressure on them a little bit, then have some fun here and there. You want to make it fun. I want to have fun, too. I want to make sure we have fun and do some things we want, and make it so they want to be there."

Ellinwood softball 2017

March 28	LINCOLN
April 4	SPEARVILLE
April 7	@Ellis
April 13	@Sublette
April 18	@Plainville
April 20	@TMP
April 28	RUSSELL
May 4	@Lincoln
May 8	ELLIS
May 9	LITTLE RIVER
May 15-19	Regional
May 25-26	State

Plenty of area athletes to watch this spring

By MIKE COURSON
I think we've been over this before. My job as a "homer" newspaper writer is to promote area athletes and teams, even if the optimism is not necessarily deserved. I think I can honestly hand out optimism this year.

A natural place to start is with the state champion Oiler tennis team. Having watched a practice while waiting on a photo...wow. The Central Plains tennis preview details their accomplishments from a year ago, but I would not be surprised at all to see the Oilers contending for another state title later this season.

Except the competition includes Sterling. The Black Bear tennis team placed fourth at state last year, just a point away from a trophy. Sterling has plenty of talent back and junior Kyler Comley rejoins the team after missing with an injury.

Central Kansas happens to be loaded with tennis talent so it should be a fun season to watch. Unfortunately, Sacred Heart's Stratton Brown

returns for his senior season at Sacred Heart. Brown cruised to a title last year, finished second in 2015, and placed fourth his freshman year. It will take a phenomenal effort by our area players to take down a very good

tennis player.

As our sports cover this season suggests, the Ellinwood softball team should remain a 2-1A powerhouse this season. Behind senior Allison Panning in the circle, the Lady Eagles have turned

out impressive records the last two years. Panning should remain a top pitcher in the area, and senior Brittney Beck swings a pretty big bat for Ellinwood.

see Talent, page 9,

Good Luck Area Teams!



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