

Nugget Baseball Is Up For This Season's Challenges

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After the COVID pandemic put spring sports on hiatus last year, the 2021 Hawley Varsity Baseball season has begun. The team looks to continue its reputation of being a competitive ball club this spring. Beau Lofgren (157-136, three-time Section Coach of the Year) is now in his 19th season as the head coach of the program that began in 2003.

"You can't beat this time of the year—baseball season," Lofgren said. "The Twins just started, Mother Nature has been very kind early on, and we are thankful for the opportunity to represent our school and community playing some ball. Throughout the years here, our program has been blessed with tremendous young men, and this year will be no different!"

The Nuggets' last spring season was in 2019. That team finished with an 11-11 record, but achieved its goal of peaking at playoff time.

"We had some major ups and downs throughout that year in the regular season," Lofgren said. "We stumbled into the playoffs losing four of our last five. However, we played some awesome baseball when it counted and made a deep run in the playoffs."

In the opening round, Hawley upset the #2 seeded Warroad Warriors 6-4, and then took out the Park Rapids Panthers 8-1 to make it to the Sub-Section Championship. Hawley lost 9-4, and then dropped a tough 3-0 game to Wadena, a team that had a 24-3 record.

"If one or two things go our way in that Wadena game, we win the game, but that's baseball."

Mason Klevgaard, Noah Glad, Gunnar Lawson, Trayton Cossette, and George Pasche were seniors on that pre-COVID squad.

"Those guys were phenomenal ballplayers and men," said Lofgren. "They led by example, possessed the perfect balance of grit and fun it took to be successful, and laid it all out there each night. Nothing but good memories."

Hawley looked to continue to build upon the success of the 2019 season with nine seniors on the 2020 roster. However, the COVID pandemic came out of nowhere in the middle of March and threw everyone off guard.

"Those were some extremely uncertain times," noted Lofgren. "We had two indoor practices before the shelter-in-place took hold. Like most folks, I really believed we'd have like a two- to three-week break and then be back."

The boys last year waited and waited to see what would happen. The MSHSL called things off about a month later and the 2020 spring season officially was over.

"It was shocking," Lofgren said. "I couldn't believe it. My heart sank like a ton of bricks for those senior boys. At least they could say they went undefeated during their senior year!"

All was not lost, however, following the spring cancellation. Boys in grades 10-12 were able to play summer baseball against their conference rivals in a temporary Babe Ruth Baseball league.

"This was the best medicine after the spring season evaporated," commented Lofgren. "We had a ton

of kids out, we played 20 games in 30 days, those seniors were excellent leaders, and it was the beginning of getting back to normal. Out of all the teams I've coached in various sports, that squad ranks right up there in terms of importance and proud moments considering the circumstances."

Those nine seniors were Cade Carley, Derian Gerdes, Michael Slette, Nick Palmer, Keenan Syverson, Carter Langer, Cole Matson, Nathan Sperr, and Keagan Gilbert.

"These fellas patiently waited for their turn to play and lead, and they didn't disappoint," exclaimed Lofgren. "The team finished 10-10 and lost several close games. It's too bad they were robbed of a spring season because we will never know what could have happened on the field. But, I do know they will continue to be fine men off of it. I'm very proud of those nine guys."

Let's shift gears and focus on the season at hand. The 2021 season will look and feel very similar to seasons past. The team has a slate of 20 regular season games, the Heart O'Lakes and Section 8AA are chock full of solid teams, and Hawley will have a mix of youth and experience on the field.

"We have a good nucleus of players returning from last summer," said Lofgren. "That will help initially, and once they start hitting their stride, it will elevate everyone's play."

One major change, however, will be wearing masks while practicing and playing.

"Well, I can honestly vouch for the kids that this is probably their least favorite part of playing baseball in the COVID era," said Lofgren. "However, this pandemic is nothing to take lightly. The boys have been doing their part to wear masks, sanitize, and be socially distant. They're used to the routine set forth in other activities and school."

The weather has been "Minnesota nice" thus far, which has been a positive aspect early on in the year.

"In 2018 and 2019, we were inside for five-plus weeks before we even stepped outside," said Lofgren. "This year, we were outside Day One, and that was a huge shot in the arm for us. No one likes to be cooped up inside for baseball."

Hawley has four seniors on the team this year. The Nuggets will be led by senior captains Gavin Klevgaard and Alex Bratsch.

"Gavin and Alex are terrific," said Lofgren. "They will anchor our pitching staff, set the table atop our lineup, provide solid defense, and they just know how to carry themselves. If you want to know how to do things right, just watch them."

Bratsch will pitch, play shortstop, and catch while Klevgaard will pitch and play shortstop as well. Other seniors on the team include Bryce Fenske and Billy Renner, both of whom will play outfield.

"Bryce and Billy are the definition of happy-go-lucky," commented Lofgren. "They work hard, are team players, and enjoy being a part of the group."

The Nuggets possess a strong junior class this year that are used to success.

"This is a crucial year for these juniors," Lofgren said. "They missed an important year of development last spring, but we need them to pick up the slack and mature quickly if we are to be in our ballgames. I



The Hawley Nuggets baseball team members are, left to right, front row—Benjamin Geeslin, Ryan Sperr, Andrew Dahl, Billy Renner, Bryce Fenske, Gavin Klevgaard; back row—Dustin Gerdes, Aiden Dahl, Bailey Thomson, Teague Spillum, Joey Aakre, Bryant Carlisle and Alex Bratsch. Not pictured is Lance Weiss.

know they are ready."

Teague Spillum will be the team's starting first baseman and will see some time on the mound.

"Teague loves the game of baseball," said Lofgren. "He's going to be a big hitter for us in the middle of our lineup and will need to eat some innings on the mound. I can't wait to see him bust out."

Bailey Thomson looks to build upon a great summer last year and successful basketball season and will be a key member of the team, playing third base and catching.

"Bailey is a fun guy," said Lofgren. "You can give him grief and he'll dish it right back. On a serious note, he works hard and appreciates getting opportunities. His hard work and patience have paid off, so now it's time for him to step up."

Joey Aakre will also play some third base and will roam the outfield as well.

"Joey's athleticism could be a game changer offensively," Lofgren said. "He is quick out of the box and is only going to improve. We will need his versatility defensively as he bops back and forth with positions."

Bryant Carlisle will man a corner outfield spot for the team to start with, and Lofgren is impressed with his work ethic.

"Bryant has gone above and beyond so far in practice," said Lofgren. "He takes extra cuts in the cage, flyballs in the outfield, shags balls for me, and his demeanor has been both confident but also curious to learn more. I'm glad to have him on our team. He gets bonus points because Carlisle, in my opinion, is a great-sounding baseball name!"

Hawley has a set of twins on the club as Aidan and Andrew Dahl return for another season on the diamond.

"I've known these two boys for a long time," smiled Lofgren. "They might share the same name, but they are different in a lot of ways. Aidan will play some shortstop, outfield, and pitch at some point. Andrew will start in the outfield and look to pitch. They both, however, have a burning desire to compete. I'm expecting big things from these two."

For one junior, however, his season tragically ended before it began. Lance Weiss, the team's starting catcher coming into the season, suffered a fractured tibial plateau, which is the upper part of the shinbone that involves the knee joint. It happened during a fielding drill in practice during the first week of the season.

"This is without a doubt the most tragic on-field event I've been a part of in coaching," Lofgren lamented. "You have this young man who does everything right on and off the field, is the quiet leader of the boys in his class on the team, and gets his opportunity to be the team's starting catcher...and WHAM ... DONE. It breaks my heart."

Weiss recently had surgery and won't be able to apply pressure to his leg for 12 weeks.

"He has a lengthy road ahead of him that includes a great deal of patience initially followed by physical therapy," Lofgren said. "What impresses me most, though, is that he has not played the sympathy or pity card once. He's accepted what's happened and has moved on, which is the right thing to do."

With a full recovery, Weiss will be back in action next spring.

Three sophomores will make their varsity baseball debuts this spring. Benjamin Geeslin, Dustin Gerdes, and Ryan Sperr will be thrown in the fire right away to round out the team's varsity roster. Geeslin will play some middle infield and will get some time on the mound.

"I've been waiting for this day for years," Lofgren said. "The name 'Geeslin' is synonymous with baseball here. Ben's uncle David was a three-year starting shortstop and pitcher here, playing on the first-ever Nuggets baseball team in 2003. It's been 16 years since I've written Geeslin on a lineup card, so I'm thrilled to be able to do that again!"

Gerdes' role will be as a super-utility player as he can play middle infield, catch, pitch, and play outfield.

"I coached Dustin when he was in third grade," recalled Lofgren.

"He was silky smooth back then defensively, and we will need his ability to play all over this year. He's a baseball junkie and his progression this year will be key."

Sperr is no stranger to the baseball diamond. On the field, he will serve as a first baseman, pitcher, and possibly third base as well.

"Ryan's what you could call a man-child," Lofgren chuckled. "He's so strong, and will be a force at the plate once he gets acclimated to varsity pitching. He, along with the other sophomores, will really need to put in time to step up their game. All three boys bring good vibes, commitment, and a love of baseball to the ballpark. I'm glad to have them on board."

Lofgren will again be assisted by Keith Hanson. Coach Hanson has been the assistant since 2010, has many years of experience as an umpire, and has been a long-time member and manager of the Ada A's amateur baseball team.

"Coach Hanson is a dear friend and colleague of mine. To have him by my side is a blessing. I'm not sure if he'd say the same about me, though," Lofgren joked. "We are very opposite in the way we do our business, but I'm thankful to have those differences of philosophies. I believe that is why we work well together. He's clear, concise, and tells it how it is to the players. It's up to the players to take it or leave it. He gets through to the kids and when he speaks, they listen."

The Nuggets will enjoy having junior high baseball for the seventh year in a row. Steve Pasche returns for his seventh season coaching the 7th and 8th graders.

"I'm spoiled to have a coach of Steve's caliber working with me," Lofgren said. "Year in and year out, he provides excellent instruction and discipline to those boys. He values each player and knows what makes them click."

Also new to the program on the coaching side of things is someone very familiar to Hawley Baseball. Nathan Sperr, who graduated from Hawley in 2020, is currently a student at Bemidji State University. He will

serve as a volunteer coach in 2021. Sperr also made the BSU baseball team as a walk-on, a testament to his drive and work-ethic.

"It's been a huge asset to have Nathan around the guys early on here," Lofgren said. "Nathan knows these boys well, is extremely positive, and is credible. He won't be around every day, but when he is, Nathan's time will be greatly utilized and appreciated."

Coach Lofgren believes Perham, followed by DGF and Barnesville, to be the top teams in the Heart O'Lakes Conference.

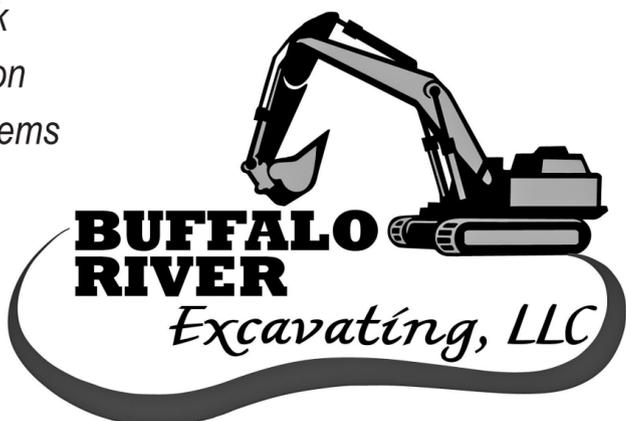
"That's what I'm guessing, but believe me, I'm no expert," stated Lofgren. "You have to show up each night in the HOL if you expect to compete and win. That's what I love about our conference. Great coaches, programs, and respect for each other is what it's all about!"

Wadena, Warroad, Roseau, and East Grand Forks will be teams to contend for the Section 8AA title.

"The competition in the HOL and Section 8AA never lets down," Lofgren commented. "A lot of section teams also have hockey at their schools. Baseball and hockey seem to go hand in hand. It will be interesting to see what unfolds. But anyone can beat anyone at anytime, especially in baseball," said Lofgren. "No matter what teams' records are, everyone has at least one pitcher that can flat out throw and beat you. That's why you play the games and throw records out the window come playoff time."

Lofgren concluded with the following: "As always, the number one goal for our kids is to control what they can control. Attitude, effort, enthusiasm, and respect are all things we as humans have control over. We're up for the challenge. With hard work, energy, and a positive mindset, we will be able to compete night in and night out. Once we play some games, we'll have a better idea of what to improve upon. The goal is to peak at the end and compete into June. I know one thing for sure, no team will have more fun than us!"

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