

Wildcats look to bring back winning tradition

By Lauren Callison

The Wildcat softball program has a new face and a new mentality.

New head softball coach Rich Darnell is taking this 2024 season by the reins and “bringing back the tradition” of Wildcat teams of the past, including the 2013 state champions.

Coach Darnell has 25 years of coaching experience, mostly in travel ball, and was head varsity coach at Davenport Assumption High School from 2002-2004.

The Wildcats went 11-26 last season with a team batting average of .240. Recent offensive struggles are where Coach Darnell is focused.

“Fixing our offense is my first priority. I’ve been a hitting instructor for 30 years, so getting the girls to buy into my philosophy has been great so far,” he said.

“The main goal is to have more power because we definitely have the talent.”

As a freshman, Bailey Kraklio led the team on the field as catcher and returns with the highest batting average, .337, and the highest on-base percentage, .379.

She strives to continue to get better with Coach Darnell’s offensive expertise.

“I really like Coach Darnell. I think he is a great asset to the program, and he is already making great changes to the program,” Kraklio said. “For me, there is always

room for improvement, and I’m working on making more contact with the ball. And as a catcher, I think I need to be more of a leader on the field this year and be more vocal than last year.”

Coach Darnell has had the opportunity to work with a few of the Wildcat players as their hitting instructor prior to taking the position at Durant, including senior center fielder Avery Paper.

Paper used to bat righty but has since switched over to slapping with the help of Coach Darnell.

“I have liked the transition to becoming a slapper,” Paper said. “Now I feel a lot more confident in myself this season and what I can accomplish.”

Of course, this season is a special one for Paper since it’s her last season as a Wildcat on the softball field.

“Because it is my senior year, I’m lucky we have a coach that cares so much about softball and wants the best for us,” she said.

“Throughout the open gyms that we have been having, I am already seeing so much improvement in everyone. It’s really great to see.”

Coach Darnell has no concerns about pitching depth or experience for the Wildcats as he enters the softball program with three freshman pitchers who pitched for the varsity team last year as eighth grad-

ers: Allison Toft, Isla Petersen, and Raylynn Schlapkohl.

“In my mind I have three of the best freshman pitchers in the state,” he said.

“I was blessed to take over a program with Allison, Isla, and Raylynn. They are all outstanding pitchers and are ready to lead this team for four years.”

Toft feels more comfortable having two other freshman pitchers right by her side, and she enjoys the challenge that comes with it.

“We have a very young pitching staff, which means we have stuff to learn, but it can also make for a competitive season,” said Toft, who had the lowest ERA on the team last season at 2.49.

Although it was challenging at times for Toft to acclimate herself to a varsity lineup as an eighth grader, it didn’t affect her performance.

“I knew I could do it, but sometimes it would take me a minute to relax and feel like I could do it,” she said.

Now after a year of experience under her belt, she feels much more confident entering this season.

“I think the first year can be hard, especially because I was one of the youngest, but now after completing a season, it definitely makes me feel more confident, and it will be easier to settle in,” she said.

Even with the young lineup, Coach



Photo by Nic Poston

Freshman Isla Petersen throws a pitch in a home game last season.

Darnell sees the potential in this team.

“The goal is to get to state and hopefully win it; we want to bring back the tradition,” he said.

Finishing with a loss to the Wilton Beavers last year in the second round of the playoffs, the Wildcats will pick up right where they left off, starting their new path to success on May 20, seeking revenge against the Beavers in an away game at Wilton.

“I’m the old school coach who preaches hard work, discipline, integrity and most of all unity,” Coach Darnell said. “We have the talent, and they have worked so hard this winter. Now they have to believe in themselves and their team.”

Lopsided playoff loss motivates baseball team

By Paige Happ

Head baseball coach Colin Meyer believes the Wildcats have something to prove after falling to the Mid-Prairie Golden Hawks 11-0 in the second round of the playoffs last year.

“You always want to win your last game of the year and the way we ended our season last year I think has left a bad taste in the mouth of this year’s team, and I think it’s helping them push to be better this year,” said Coach Meyer who began his second stint as Durant’s baseball coach last year. He also coached the baseball team from 2008 to 2017.

Coach Meyer wants to build upon the changes he made last year and the success shown by his players. The Wildcats finished fourth in the River Valley South and had an overall record of 14-13.

The Wildcat lineup has lost some impactful players such as catcher Garrett Hollenback who was named second-team River Valley South catcher and had a batting average of .347.

Coach Meyer sees four players who could step into the position of catcher, but it will ultimately come down to how well they hit.

Junior Wyatt Cole, sophomore Reid Hollenback, freshman Ronnie Maiers, and eighth grader Boston Weimerskirch have shown great progression in the off-season. Reid is the younger brother of Garrett Hollenback.

Also graduating was Brady Meincke, who played second base and hit

.424, which was the second best average on the team.

“Usually when a team has to replace a second baseman, it’s not too much of a worry, but when you have a second baseman that hits over .400, it’s almost unheard of,” said Coach Meyer.

“I honestly don’t expect us to replace Brady’s bat this year. I think defensively we can find someone to fill the void and play just as good as Brady. Offensively my hope is to find someone that can hit over .275 and then hopefully some of the other guys’ averages go up too.”

Overall, Coach Meyer is content with the way the Wildcats lineup is looking.

“I feel like we should be extremely strong in every aspect of the game,” said Coach Meyer. “I think the biggest drop off is the speed we lost on the bases from last season, but we should still have a lot of success there.”

Another graduate, Nolan DeLong, led the Wildcats in stolen bases last season with 22.

A few defensive spots will need to be filled, but pitching is looking strong coming into the season with the top two pitchers returning from last year.

“Conner Schwarz and Ryan Wulf will try and hold down their one and two spots,” said Coach Meyer.

“There’s a lot of competition for that number three spot between Colby Gast, Trey Ramer, David Holtz and Collier Rockow who has come back out for his senior year and has looked very good.”

Ryan Wulf, a senior, started the Mid-Prairie playoff game last year and has mullered over the game that ended their 2023 season.

“Knowing that last season didn’t end how we wanted it to has only made me more excited to play this year,” said Wulf who made 11 starts last season and finished with an earned run average of 3.55.

“Us players and the coaches have high expectations this season, and it should be a really fun ride this year.”

Wulf plans to start his senior season with a strong set of the goals he plans to accomplish.

“They are to have a batting average above .400 this season, and as a pitcher, I want to have at least 55 strikeouts when the season is over,” said Wulf.

Some of Wulf’s team goals are to win the conference and ultimately make it to the state tournament.

Wulf has been putting in the work in the off-season by going to pitching and hitting lessons at the Diamond Dreams Sports Academy in North Liberty.

Wulf has been working on expanding his pitching repertoire by trying new pitches.

“This year I plan on focusing on one game at a time and doing whatever it takes to win,” said Wulf.

“Baseball is a game of failure. If you bat 10 times and you get a hit three out of those 10 times, you are considered good. That’s only 30 percent of the time. If you do that in the classroom at school, you are fail-

ing.”

Junior Conner Schwarz showed great improvement last season and was named first-team River Valley South as an infielder. Schwarz had a batting average of .444 and an on base percentage of .495 last season.

Schwarz wants to focus on his defensive game as he returns as one of the Wildcats’ key pitchers. When not pitching, Schwarz played shortstop for the Wildcats.

“I am trying to focus mostly on pitching this year,” said Schwarz. “I am doing that because pitching is probably one of the most important, if not the most important thing, on defense. If you can’t throw strikes, you’re not gonna get any outs.”

Schwarz is also eager to get on the field and compete again. He has attended every open gym he could and continued to put in the work during the off-season.

“I just want to play against other teams and compete,” said Schwarz. “I want to have a 1.2 ERA or below this season. Also I want to make All-District and All-Conference again this year.”

However, Coach Meyer said his junior shortstop was overlooked when the postseason awards were handed out.

“Conner Schwarz was a player that took a huge leap last year, and in my opinion got snubbed from being on an All-State team,” said Coach Meyer, who also expects big seasons out of Gast and Ramer, sophomores, and Wulf. He said he also hopes senior Charles Huesmann “continues to build on the success he had last season.”

NIL From page 1

The IHSA recommends the student-athlete contact a collegiate governing body such as the NCAA “to ensure any NIL activity doesn’t jeopardize collegiate eligibility.”

Mckinley understands the regulations involved in an NIL agreement.

“With the NIL rules when I promote the brand, I can’t include the school, so it’s not like I can really promote the school in that sense,” Mckinley said.

“After the NIL passed for college

athletes, and seeing all the NIL’s take over, I assumed it would reach the high school level eventually.”

Mr. Austin Bowman is the owner of Midwest Iron Addicts, which has two gyms, one in Walcott and the other in Maquoketa. He is also the Durant Cat Pac coach.

Ten percent of the gym members at the Walcott gym are Durant athletes, according to Mr. Bowman.

The gym offers a wide variety of equipment and personal training, which in-

cludes custom diet planning and weekly check-ins for accountability.

Mckinley was the first sponsored athlete with Midwest Iron Addicts Gym. Mr. Bowman decided to offer Tate the sponsorship because of how much work he has put in his gym.

“I’ve watched Tate come in early before many others, sometimes 4:30-5 a.m., and work hard over the years,” said Mr. Bowman. “I’ve watched him grow not only physically but mentally as well. As a per-

sonal trainer and bodybuilding competitor, I know the hardwork and discipline needed to put on the size and strength that Tate has over these last few years, and he’s done a great job.”

Mckinley has a six-month contract where he is given Midwest Iron Addicts gym merchandise including a hat, sweatshirt, sweatpants, tee shirt, shaker bottle, and gym bag along with \$75 per month in credit for any nutritional supplements he may need along the way.