



Fall Sports Preview 2017

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Bulldog brotherhood

Sacrifice, hard work on and off the field

By Ryan Lewis

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When the Bulldogs step onto the football field, the crowd takes notice.

They command a certain level of respect that not many programs can and that respect has been earned after the coaching staff transformed a once stagnant football program into a consistent Class 5A powerhouse.

From their improbable Class 5A state championship just two years ago to last year's heartbreaking playoff exit to the eventual Class 5A state championship winning Carl Albert Titans, the Bulldogs enter every stadium with the desire to win and they exit the stadium having left everything out on the field.

They are a unified front that marches into battle against some of the toughest teams in the state and each time they battle until the final whistle is blown.

They are the epitome of hard work and sacrifice and every year the team raises the bar on what it means to be a Bulldog.

There are so many things that make this team what it is today. The coaching staff has done tremendous work in preparing this team for not only the football field but life as well.

But it is the hunger inside each Bulldog football player that takes what the coaches teach them and turns it into the product that takes the field with confidence each Friday night in the fall.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again, from top to bottom, this is probably one of the most committed,

hard-working groups of young men that I have been associated with," Head Coach Todd Vargas said. "They have learned through the program the last few years who to be, how to practice, and how to work. So far they are doing a great job of learning and giving tremendous effort."

The effort has shown in many different ways. Should one drive by the Doc Tennessen Training Facility on the Altus High School campus in the early morning hours, they will find the Bulldogs putting in extra work in the weight room.

The athletes know what it means to be committed and they all put in equal amounts of work so that no one person ever lets the team down.

They are a brotherhood on and off the field and after months of hard work and sacrifice, the time has come for them to find out what they can do when they take the field against Clinton.

"Well you know, the thing is, we do have some guys that are going to be playing that might not have as much experience but from what we can tell through practices starting with spring ball, tune-up camp, and now two-a-days, they are maturing, they have a great desire to learn, and we are really excited about who we can be," Vargas said. "Offensively we have some returners, we feel we have some special playmakers at the quarterback, the running back, and the slot positions. We feel like this year we can even throw and catch the ball to a much greater extent. Offensively on the line, we're very comfortable with the kids. We feel offensively we can be very explosive and cause lots



Courtesy photos | Henry Holub

of problems for defenses and we are really excited."

While much of the offense remains the same with a few additional plays added to the mix this summer, the defense has taken on a whole new look altogether.

The Bulldogs have adopted the 4-3 defensive scheme this year.

"Defensively, we've moved to a different scheme than we have had in the past few years and we did that for two reasons. One, we felt like our kids fit the 4-3 better and number two, we felt like when it came to crunch time in the playoffs in the past few years, we always migrated to a four-man front anyway. So we're running the 4-3 and we feel like we have really great kids. Our front seven is very athletic, very physical, and our back four—although we will probably have four juniors take the safety spot—they're really learning well and they work so hard and are so diligent with the scheme and the techniques they are really advancing way farther than we thought they would."

There are a lot of things this team does well and preparation is one of the most important of all of those things.

They are well coached and ready for any situation that might come their way in a football game. The fact that the Bulldogs have up and coming players looking to start on the team despite having little on the field experience does not bother Vargas and the rest of the coaching staff.

"If anybody would say that would be our fault, that would be it. We have a bunch of guys who just haven't played a lot of varsity and that's not all of them that's just scattered positions throughout the team but mostly on defense is where we're going to have a few guys get in there that maybe haven't played as much," Vargas said. "With that being said, we feel like the guys in those positions are going to be just fine."

What the Bulldogs have in perceived weaknesses, they more than make up for in other areas of their game.

The Bulldogs are strong at nearly every position and with an extra year of experience under his belt, quarterback Jake Vargas has a plethora of weapons at his disposal.

Though the Bulldogs are traditionally a run-first offense, they have not abandoned the passing game and instead of turned it up a notch.

“We’re always going to be run-first and we’re not going to shy away from that. This is a running offense no doubt and we feel like we have the weapons to run the football just like we have in past years, but it’s always nice when you’re effective in the passing game because it keeps people honest. They can’t crowd the blocks, they have to honor that and we really feel like this year we’re going to be more productive in the passing game,” Vargas said. “Jake is throwing the ball a lot better and we feel like our receivers are in a place where they’re going to be able to catch the ball more.”

“To be honest, with Coach [Dusty] Davis running the offense there is just more of a comfort level on what we’re trying to do, but make no bones about it, if we’re running the ball and we never have to pass, so be it,” he added. “But we’re going to do whatever the defense gives us the opportunity to do. We felt like at the end of the year last year we started throwing the ball a lot better and a lot of that is maturation through Jake but we’re really excited about the opportunity to be able to throw more.”

The ability to throw the ball makes the Bulldog offense that much more potent and will take some of the pressure off the running backs and open lanes for them giving the Bulldog offense the potential to be one of the most dangerous offenses in Class 5A football.

Whether that translates to a state championship

or not remains to be seen and as Vargas often says, that is not their main goal.

“We feel like winning is a byproduct of what we stand for. That’s not the goal, we don’t come out every day and say we’re going to win but obviously that’s what we want and what we expect,” Vargas said. “What we are concerned about is the day-to-day process. It is playing for the ‘A’. It is taking all of those core values that we stand for, implementing those in player’s and coaches’ lives and being true to those things.”

“We love kids, we promote kids, we believe in kids and we put them in the position to be successful and then those kids believe in themselves and the coaches and all of that winning takes place,” he added. “Obviously, our kids want to win a championship, I do and all of the coaches do, but we’re not looking at outcomes, we’re looking at the process. We’ve got to get better and better every day and our defense has a slogan to be one percent better every day. Clinton is game one and that’s who we’re concerned with.”

With the team’s focus on Clinton, each player and coach is putting in more work than ever before to make sure that this team is prepared to open the season.

Vargas has said that this is the hardest working group of players he has ever coached and it is something he will continue to repeat until everyone knows just how special this group of young

men is to him.

“Work ethic and commitment to the brotherhood. These kids have bought into a relentless effort during practice and sprints. We still show up every morning at 6:30 and lift. Last week we were practicing from 6:30 - 9:30 am and then coming back at 3 p.m. and putting in a two-hour practice and having meetings,” Vargas said. “They’re hungry to win, they’re hungry for success and they do everything that the coaches ask of them and certainly more than I could have even anticipated.”

“Anytime you lose a group of seniors you’re always concerned about how next year’s seniors are going to be and these seniors are a tremendous group of young men. They are hard working servants and we really believe the servant leadership that we’ve been doing on the ‘Servant Saturdays’ is very tied in because this group is a very selfless group,” he added. “They don’t care who scores, who gets the ball, or who makes the tackle just as long as the team does. When you have a group of guys who are committed to the team like these guys are, they make it very fun to coach.”

The countdown to Clinton is on.

At 7 p.m. Friday, the Red Tornadoes come to Hightower Memorial Stadium to take on the Bulldogs and officially open the 2017 high school football season.

The Bulldogs are ready and they are hungry. All the work they have put in during the spring and summer months is finally going to be implemented in a game-time situation.

The coaches and the players all have confidence in themselves and on Friday night, the rest of Altus will get to experience what they have known all along.

“We vow as a team to always outwork the other team and to be in better shape and we really feel like this is the best-conditioned team that we can put out on the field,” Vargas said. “These guys have grueling practices. The great thing about these kids is they have embraced hard work and they have embraced the pain and discomfort and because of that, we feel like our guys are really getting into good shape and we’ll be able to do everything that we need to do.”

“We ‘play for the A’ and the community and the highlight of my day is getting to get up and come coach these kids. They really do make it fun,” Vargas said.



Courtesy photos | Henry Holub

Reach Ryan Lewis at 580-482-1221, ext. 2076.

AHS softball hopes to build on last season's accomplishments

By Ryan Lewis

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Since the last time the Lady Bulldogs softball team took the field last fall, much has changed with the program. A new coach has taken over the reins of the team and the program is headed in an entirely new direction.

Despite the changes at the head coaching position, the same standards are in place under head coach Ricky Bull as they were during Joey Stengell's run.

Bull expects the team to build on what they were able to accomplish last season and continue heading in the right direction after so many down years on the softball diamond.

The team returns several starters from last season's team including Kelsee Baker at short stop, Alex Jackson at catcher, Kymbree McKee at pitcher, Brooke Hill in the outfield, and Craigie Steed at third base.

There are other familiar faces back on the field as well including utility player Alana Lopez, first baseman Destiny Von Raesfeld, outfielder Emelie Von Raesfeld, and third baseman and outfielder Jerzey Ybarra.

There is quite a bit of experience between all of the returning players and having those players with the on-the-field knowledge and the desire to do well puts Bull in a good position.

"I really feel like it's a pretty solid senior class. We have five seniors in Kelsee, Alex, Kymbree, Craigie,

and Destiny and the thing about them is they can all hit it and hit it with power which is a good thing. They are all capable of getting the extra base hits and you don't always get that in girls softball," Bull said. "They've all started so we'll be looking to them for senior leadership and to do good things with the bat and on the field. We've also really got a good mix of players in each grade that I think will all be able to contribute."

Each of the returning players was a big part of what the Lady Bulldogs were able to do last season as they improved from a five-win team just a year earlier to a nine-win team.

Bull knows there is still much work to be done but he feels confident that

he has the right players to eclipse last year's mark and get the team headed in the right direction.

As he works on familiarizing himself with his players, Bull is learning who he can place where to best utilize their skill sets and to make this team as good as it can be.

"For somebody that has been out of it for as long as I have, the only comparison I have is with the four teams I coached in the early 2000s and that really has nothing to do with this season. The comparison has to be with who our opponents are going to be," Bull said. "I do know at this point, I think our hitting is quite a bit ahead of our fielding. In my experience before, it took our hitting a little bit longer to come



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around and get consistent.”

“I’m a really big proponent of the fundamentals. Not only the physical things of throwing, catching, fielding, and hitting but also there is a lot of mental that goes into the game of softball too as far as what play to make defensively depending on the situation and knowing what to do as a baserunner,” he added. “I think if our pitchers can throw strikes and move the ball around in the zone and we can play defense we’ll have a chance to be pretty good because I know we’re going to hit the ball well. Obviously, you need to spend a lot of time on throwing, hitting, fielding regardless but we’ve probably spent more time on fielding because I feel like that is our biggest weakness right now.”

What Bull does not want to start off saying is that this team will compete for a state championship right out of the gate.

He knows that a program must earn the right to play for a title but he knows that he wants the team to be on that path and he believes he can get them there.

“A lot of new coaches like to come in and talk about winning a state championship. Obviously, that would be nice but I think our first goal ought to be to see if we can just reach the state tournament because you have to get there just to have a chance to win it,” Bull said. “Probably an even better goal than that would be to develop a program where year-in and year-out, we made it to the finals of the regional tournament to play for an opportunity to go to the state tournament. If you can do that on a consistent basis and start breaking through and making the state tournament and experiencing what it’s like, you’re going to eventually put yourself in a position to have a chance to win it.”

“I bet if you did research on all the teams that have either never been to the state tournament in their program’s history or it has been 10 years



since they last went, I bet it is really rare for a team to suddenly have a good team and make it and win the whole thing in their first year,” he added. “It usually does not work out that way. You need to be a program that consistently goes to the state tournament to really have a chance to win it.”

Bull plans to take the team and make it something special. He wants to be the coach of the program long term and believes the inconsistency has played a large part in the team’s struggle to be successful.

“I wouldn’t say this is an excuse but there have

been multiple coaching changes in the past 13 years and I don’t care what sport you’re talking about that makes it difficult too when you don’t have the stability of the kids knowing year after year of how they’re going to do things. Every coach changes things up to a certain extent,” Bull said. “I feel like at this point, I’d like to do this a few years if everything goes how I’m hoping and thinking it’s going to go. I don’t expect this to be a one or two year deal.”

Now the season has begun and the hope is that the team is finally on the right track to becoming one of Class 5A’s most successful programs.

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Cross country team finds its spark

By Ryan Lewis

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There are few athletes who have put in the kind of work Bethany Garrison and Cayden Beckner have this summer as they set about preparing for the beginning of this fall's cross country season.

They have gone above and beyond to give the Lady Bulldogs cross country team a legitimate shot at a state championship and they have worked tirelessly when most other athletes have been on vacation.

The duo has made strides thanks to their dedication to the sport of running and they look to lead the team once the season gets underway.

But they cannot do it alone and along with several other girls, they give this team a spark that it has been missing for several years.

In addition to returners Olga Lopez and Autumn Goodwin, there are several top runners coming to the high school team from the junior high team. Among those is Sarah

Scott, Grace Gilliam, Anna Merritt, and Angel Willoughby.

"Our girl's team will be stronger than it has been in quite some time because of the freshmen coming up. Last year we finished 11th at state and that was pretty good for us because we finished seventh at regionals," Head Coach Rick Patterson said. "In this bunch, when Beth was an eighth grader they were undefeated in the junior high. I don't think we'll go undefeated but we should have a pretty good group."

Rylee Borrego was going to be another runner on the team but will not be able to participate this season due to a recent knee surgery. Instead, she will be the team's manager this season.

Even with Borrego missing, the group appears to be destined for great things and most of them are still young so the team appears to be built well for the foreseeable future.

"The girls should be really strong. I know I have four girls who can go and if we can find a fifth girl or sixth

girl then we'll be even better," Patterson said. "I think the boys will be stronger as well because it is mainly a senior bunch. There are a couple of sophomores in there but it is mostly seniors."

That boy's team is made up of Ryan Oden, Josh Baker, Jesse Benitez, Macel Canterbury, Matt McCollum, Adrian Avilez, Alan Palestino, Calvin Wagoner, and Jonathan Wathen.

Moses McCaskill and Michael James are two newcomers to the team but also hope to make an impact where Bulldogs cross country is concerned.

Patterson is hoping the team gets going early and make strides as they get deeper into the season.

"I hope we do well by the Duncan and Elgin meets. Our schedule is pretty much like it was last year," Patterson said.

Although Patterson has had 52 athletes sign up to compete in cross country, he does not expect that many to show up or hang around once the season begins.

"I usually have anywhere from 30-35," Patterson said. "Once the season begins, we may have some come out of the woodwork. I've got about 25-30 that I've never even seen before. So we'll see who comes out and who doesn't."

Although Patterson is expecting a lot less people to show up than what has signed up, he knows where the best runners on his team stands and he is excited for what he has seen from them so far.

"Cayden and Beth have been running all summer. They've both really been doing really well," Patterson said. "The strongest girls from what I've seen is Cayden, Beth, and Olga. On the boy's side Josh, Ryan, and Calvin have been doing really well. There is a lot of potential there, it's just getting them all together and getting them into shape."

The team ran in Elk City Saturday and will be back in action at Weatherford on Aug. 26.

Reach Ryan Lewis at 580-482-1221, ext. 2076.

Navajo fall baseball is shaping up to do big things

By Ryan Lewis

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There are few teams that command as much respect on the baseball diamond as the Navajo High School Indians. The Indians are a consistent and well-coached team who battle each year for a chance at a championship.

In spring baseball, the Indians finished 27-5 and were as impressive in person as they were on paper. The team made plans when it needed them the most and they seemed to score at will against opponents both unranked and ranked.

But fall baseball is a different beast altogether.

Last fall, the Indians struggled in the early going. When they lost, it was by as few as two or three runs and when they won, it was by as many as 17 runs. They finished the fall season with an 11-16 record, but the record is hardly an indication of how good this team really was.

This season, they have reloaded and are already off to a fantastic start. They have won five of their first seven games with big wins over Geronimo, Olustee-Eldorado, Blair, and Sentinel. Of the two games they have lost, only one was by more than two runs.

The key to Navajo's consistency is head coach Weston Winters. He has a way with taking his athletes and molding them into stars. If he finds talent, he uses it in a way that it will benefit the team.

He has more players to choose from than most and has a returning cast that appears to be on the verge of something special.

"As far as returning players, I have Tristan Netherton who is a four-year starter and who has led off for us every year since he was a

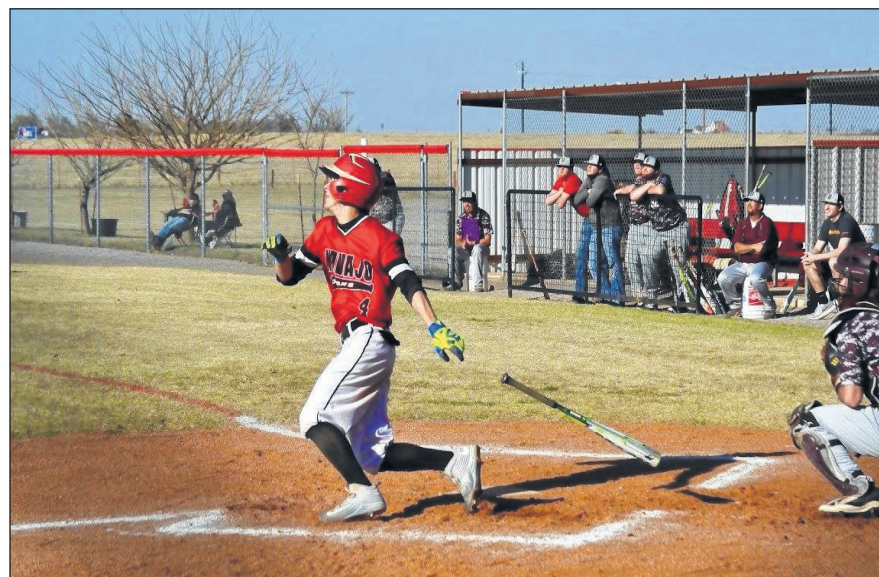
freshman. He's a little bitty guy but he can stinking go and he'll be playing somewhere next year in college. Wyatt Weaver is our second baseman and bats three-hole and is a three-year starter. Parker Chasky who plays center field and is a really good leader and I will say this, leadership on this team is really good. I've always had really good leadership," Winters said. "Holdyn Mandrel will be our number one on the mound and then he can play anywhere else I put him. Jaden Lingle is a big strong kid and started for us last year as a freshman and will hit four-hole this year. He's just a sophomore and he's really powerful. Airen Josefy is our first baseman and he is a thin kid but he has a lot of pop and will hit five-hole for us."

The returning cast puts the Navajo baseball team in a good position to be contenders in Class A baseball.

Winters has the good problem of finding where to place each player on his roster as he has so many different athletes who can play multiple positions and almost every one of them can hit the ball and hit it well.

His only major concern with the team is starting rotation on the mound.

"Our biggest deal is, who is going to be that two, three, four, and five on the mound? I've got one kid who is on the mound and will give us a chance to win every day. I have lots of kids who can throw but they just have to develop into high school pitchers," Winters said. "It's one of those deals where I lost four kids who were seniors but these other kids, they put on jerseys and they turn into ball players. We should have a chance to be in regionals and have a chance to go to the state tournament in the fall and the spring. We play a tough schedule every year and



I believe that playing tougher teams make you better."

Winters scheduled fewer of the tough teams this fall in an attempt to build the confidence of the team as they headed deeper into the season. In doing that, his hope is that the team will be better prepared and in a position to make a deep run in the state championship tournament.

He feels like the team faltered down the stretch last season and blames part of that on the lack of confidence and the teams inability to handle adversity.

"We were 11-16 last fall but that record is a little deceiving because we only played three teams that were not ranked and right off the bat, one of our best kids on the mound got injured," Winters said. "I also didn't think we were mentally tough last year in the fall. I think we kinda acted like a bunch of babies. We didn't battle adversity very well. We went to the playoffs last fall and played Ft. Cobb and that was a tough draw because they were ranked three or four. We lost the first game and had the winning runs on second and

third in the second game. My three-hole hitter hit one to right field and their kid laid out and caught it and that would have beat them. They went on to finish state runners-up in the fall so we were right there."

"The thing about fall baseball is the district is just as tough as the regional tournament in the spring because you have all these schools that are thrown into our class and when you get to spring and they're 2A, 3A, and 4A schools," he added. "Fall baseball is really really tough because you're running into teams that play baseball year round and if you don't play well you can get your butt beat, but by the time these guys get to regionals, they ought to be right there and have a chance to go for sure."

Despite losing four of his starters, Winters believes this team has what it takes to go the distance regardless of the team's opponents.

He has the athletes and the team has the desire to win. Now it is just a matter of putting it all together.

Reach Ryan Lewis at 580-482-1221, ext. 2076.

Blair baseball optimistic despite tough schedule

By Ryan Lewis

The Blair Broncs entered the 2016 fall baseball season with high expectations. They lost their first three games but it did not deter them as they bounced back and won six in a row before finishing the season 13-12 overall.

This year the expectations are the same, but one thing the Broncs have working against them is a very tough schedule. In fact, it is the toughest that it has ever been in Coach Brandon Armstrong's five-year tenure.

"I expect to have a good time but we have a grueling schedule. We began the season against Leedey who were the defending state champions in Class B baseball, Lookeba-Sickles who were the defending fall state champions in Class B baseball, Granite who is a top-10 team in Class B, Canute who is a top 15 team in Class A, and Navajo who is a top-15 team in Class A," Armstrong said.

The Broncs are in good shape with seven returning starters from last year's team and it is Armstrong's hope that their experience and leadership can put this team in the best position to succeed.

"On the mound, we have experience with Saige Knight and Tyler Tutton, Kaden Hans, Baylor Downing, Michael Smith, and Skyler Scott. We will also have three-year returning starter Payson Ramirez in center field while freshman Nick Armstrong, Brandon Williamson, Drew Winters, and Alijah Gray will battle it out for the ninth spot in our lineup," Armstrong said. "We will need them to be productive. Our pitching and defense should

be our strengths but we will have to be able to hit better and find a way to score runs. Too many times we are our own worst enemy and if we can limit our mental mistakes, we have a chance to be really good. We finally put in a weight room and the guys have been lifting and conditioning hard all summer long."

The biggest difficulty the team faces is how tough the fall baseball schedule is and what that means for the Broncs as they prepare for opponents.

Not only is the strength of schedule much more difficult but there are also fewer teams for the Broncs to play against as many schools do not play fall baseball.

"Scheduling is the most difficult aspect of fall baseball. With many schools playing football, it is very difficult to schedule games and there are very few teams in the fall you can schedule as 'warm up' games," Armstrong said. "Everyone is good and so you have to really work hard in practice to compete at a high level from the very beginning."

Armstrong believes in the team he has assembled and has seen tremendous progress from all of his players. Most of that can be attributed to the team's work ethic while some of it can be attributed to the team's attitude and how they approach each day on the baseball diamond.

"This team has bought into the work ethic you have to have to compete at a high level. Like I said, they did not take the summer off. They chose to lift and condition the entire break," Armstrong said. "That attitude has made it down to my junior

high team as well. They see the high schoolers doing it and they want to do it as well."

While every team has high hopes for each season and expects to go out and play for a chance at a state championship, Armstrong has more realistic goals for his team.

"I want us to improve each game. The schedule we play will prepare us for the playoffs," Armstrong said. "We have not won a fall district in my time here. That is our main goal. In the fall, two teams out of each regional go to state and we hope to win a district and compete for one of the two spots in regionals to go to state."

The season is still young and there is much baseball left to be played. The Broncs have yet to win a game but with the exception of Navajo and Canute, they have been within three runs of a win in each of the games they have played.

The pieces are there and the drive to succeed is there, it is just a matter of translating it into production on the field and doing everything in their power to string together victories and earn a chance to play for a state title.



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Lady Indians find new talent in upcoming season

By Ryan Lewis

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Every new season brings forth a set of new challenges for the Navajo High School Lady Indians fastpitch softball team. It is the same for every team but the Lady Indians have begun this season with several key contributors from last year's team absent from the dugout.

Gone are players like Brooke Burgess, Talayna Petzold, Cambrie Thornton, Julia Pelletier, and Kara Cook, each having graduated high school in

May. Also gone is Kaylen Carroll who transferred to Altus High School for her junior year.

The thing about the Navajo softball is that since Coach Terry Gilbert took over the team they have never had a down year. Instead of falling into a rebuilding year like so many other teams, the Lady Indians seem to rise above and reload for another deep run in the postseason.

Despite the loss of so many essential players, others have shown signs of greatness and have filled in nicely since the beginning of the season. The Lady Indians started the season off with two



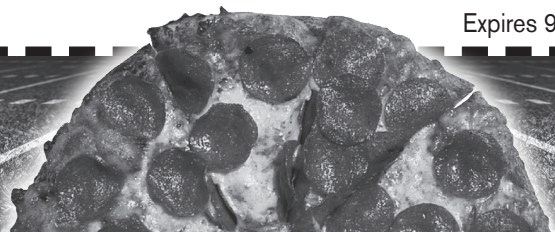
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blowout victories including a 12-0 win over Hollis and a 10-0 win over Snyder and then defeated Hobart 5-4 to jump out to a 3-0 start.

They have since lost to Weatherford and Burns Flat-Dill City before defeating Mangum 5-2 to improve to 4-2 on the season.

The team's desire to win is something that they have never lost no matter who is missing from the roster and their ability to meet adversity head-on and overcome it is something few teams have the drive to do.

But the Lady Indians are unlike most teams and the group is still loaded with some of the best talent in Class A fastpitch softball.

"We've got five returning starters including Gracee Bates, Tabitha Armstrong, Karlee McCombs, Kalee Cross and Emmy Cobb," Gilbert said. "Those are actually also our four seniors and they are pretty much our nucleus."

One of the top players on the team is Armstrong who always pitches exceptionally well and has gotten better each year.

Another player to watch on the Lady Indians roster is Bates who provides a consistent at-bat nearly every time she steps up to the plate.

"Tabitha Armstrong will be our number one in the circle. She finished up really strong last year. She was one of the best arms around here and when she went to district, she gave Canute two runs in two games and shut them out in one of the games. She can spin the ball and move it in and out and when she's on, she's tough to hit," Gilbert said. "Gracee Bates is an All-State type talent. She hit near .500 for us last year and she can wear fastpitch out. She hit .480 in the summer. She never falls off and she never really slumps. We moved her to shortstop this year after we lost Cam and so she's trying to get used

to it and she will."

"We've got a really good freshman class. They've been successful and played a lot of softball since early on. They've been together for a long time. I've got four freshmen that can all contribute and two or three of them may start for us," he added. "I've got six sophomores that have worked really hard and two or three of those girls will get a lot of playing time. They played a lot of ball in the summer on their own the last couple of years."

Because of who Gilbert has in place, he sees big things for the team and has high expectations going into the season.

"We could be pretty good. We've started playing in the summer around July 10 and we played well at times and not so well at times. We've had some kids change positions so once we get our feet on the ground in those new positions we'll be okay. Offensively we should be able to hit and score a lot of runs. We have several good arms which a lot of teams struggle with that. Defensively we may be a little shaky and we have been at times but we will get it figured out," Gilbert said.

The defense is one of Gilbert's major concerns moving forward. The team has struggled defensively at times during summer play and they have had a few miscues so far this season but Gilbert

is confident that his girls will get it figured out as the season progresses.

"Defense is our biggest issue. We're not playing very good defense. Some of that is due to kids being in different positions. We just have to work harder and get used to those different positions," Gilbert said. "We are pitching pretty well. We're really running four arms out at people and all four of them have done a pretty good job. We're not walking people and we're getting ground balls like we want to we're just not making the plays that we need to make and it's costing us. Our pitching numbers—when I look at those—are pretty good.

As for his offense, Gilbert has seen areas where the team will need to improve but he is also confident that the team will get it worked out before it becomes an issue.


"We're also not hitting the ball really well but this is a really good offensive team. We have several girls not hitting up to their capability but that will come. It's not something I have really worried a lot about because that'll click. We've just not had the number of reps we normally get by this time of year," Gilbert said.

The team won 24 games last fall and that is a number that a lot of teams never get a chance to see, but Gilbert is taking a different approach with the team this year and he has been implementing his new plan since summer softball.

His plan is to put more girls on the field so that he can truly gauge where his team is at in the grand scheme of things.


Gilbert hopes to build on that and make it all the way to the state tournament this season despite the tough schedule.

"We approached this summer a little bit different. Last year, trying to get our program built and get it on the ground, we went out to win last



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summer and we did, we were 18-4 last summer," Gilbert said. "This year, we knew we had a lot of players in different positions so I've played a lot of people and moved people around the batting order and they're not comfortable where they're at yet and I told them that up front. I said we might not win as many games but we're going to play more people, get more reps in here, and give people more of a shot to see who can hit and play where."

"The whole time I've been here we've tried to improve and to do that you have to get out and play the tough teams. We go to Fletcher, the Weatherford tournament, and the Stirling tournament," he added. "The Stirling tournament is one of the toughest tournaments in the state and a lot of times it is harder to win there than it is at state. "

As for the competition his team

faces, Gilbert is well aware of the teams that can give the Lady Indians problems going into the post-season. His hope is that the team can hit the ground running and string together wins to get ranked high in the early going.

"Binger is going to be loaded and that could be a regional draw for us and that's why it is so important to get out to good starts and get ranked because the rankings determine your postseason seeds. Binger being relatively close to us, they could be number one. That's a team you try to avoid by being ranked high," Gilbert said. "Canute is also going to be good. We beat them last year at districts but we played exceptionally well and beat them. We played them this summer and they beat us 6-1. It was a really close game going into the last inning and we had some errors that cost



us. They have one of the best arms around and we hit her well."

For now, the Lady Indians are going to set about controlling what

they can control and put the best product on the field that they can.

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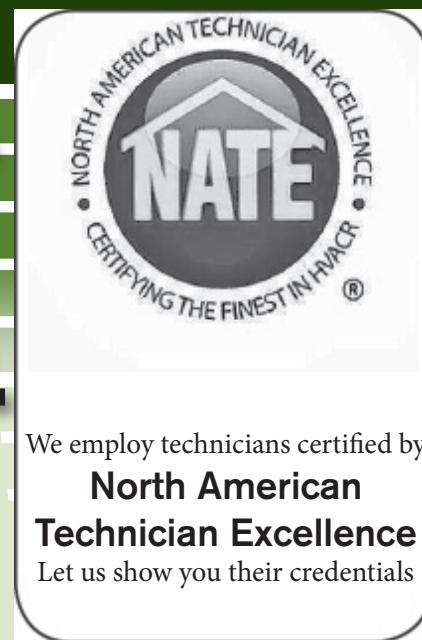
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