

## New look for Prairie softball in 2012

Written by Jake Koolbeck

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Prairie softball is going to look a little different this year. Gone are six key seniors from last year's team. The departure leaves many spots to be fielded and some leadership to be found.

Last year's seniors combined to start 194 games and were instrumental in keeping the Hawks close in their regional quarterfinal loss to Xavier last year.

The 2012 season could be a mystery for the first couple of weeks as it will be hard to determine what the new look Hawks are capable of.

"This coming week could tell us a lot about how the season goes for us, but so far I have been very pleased with the last two weeks of practice and the energy the girls have been bringing every day," Coach Kimi Hynek said. "As of this week I see us finishing in the middle of the conference, but certainly feel like we could finish higher with continued hard work throughout the season."

### Key Losses:

Prairie graduated six players that combined for 62 percent of the Hawks' hits, 62 percent of their runs and 58 percent of their RBIs.

"The loss of last year's seniors was quite significant, especially on the offensive side," Hynek said. "We have some younger players who are showing that they can be big contributors for us defensively, but what was lost in last year's seniors offensively is going to be tough for us."

That is some big production to replace and none bigger than last season's two top hitters, Shelby Crist (.393) and Katie Wieland (.365).

In the circle the Hawks will need to replace Mackenzie Blaha (1-0, 1.17 ERA). Blaha's pitching

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was limited by injury, but her leadership and big game pitching will be hard to replace.

### **Key Returning Players:**

With so much offense departing the Hawks will look to returning senior Taylor Stecklein (.319, 38 hits, 17 runs, 13 RBIs) to lead the offense.

Stecklein will need help from juniors Aly O'Brian (.267), Brittney Lash (.225) and Katie Kuch (.217) if the offense is to put up enough runs to win games. O'Brian is the best of that group but all three will need to produce more.

"I would say all four of these players need to lead our team, especially on offense," Hynek said.

Freshman Gabi Carter could be huge both offensive and in the circle for the Hawks. Carter had 10 hits, 8 RBIs and two home runs in just 19 games last season. Carter got just three starts pitching but had the best ERA outside of Blaha at 2.78.

With Carter's youth in the circle, Kuch (6-9, 4.11) will need to step up big for the pitching staff. Her 14 starts are the most by any returning pitcher.

### **Outlook:**

Prairie has almost a whole new team, so its 13-24 record from last year means very little going forward.

The key to a successful season is going to be how well the returnees play and if they can step up.

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The wild card could be the pitching and production from Carter, a potential star. Hawk fans watch her early as she could provide a big spark.

“Gabi Carter is a very promising player,” Hynek said. “She is very strong both defensively and offensively and will bring a lot to our team this season.”