

## Price is right for Xavier softball

Written by Jim Ecker

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Nikki Price must have an abundance of energy and patience.

She's the proud mother of an active 10-month-old baby boy, she teaches sixth and seventh graders at Oak Ridge Middle School and she coaches high school girls on the Xavier softball team.

That's a busy day for anyone.

Price welcomed her son, Braxton Michael, into the new world last July, just a few days after the Saints finished the 2015 season with a 24-16 record.

"We've been blessed," Price said before practice Wednesday. "He's super-fun and happy and crawling and talking and on the move all the time.

"He's a fun little guy and loves being outside, so he'll enjoy the summer, that's for sure. I'm ready for him to start sleeping through the night, but it's been good so far."

Price, entering her fourth official season as head coach, expects to enjoy the spring and summer with the Saints, despite the loss of Erin Drahozal and Morgan Breitbach to graduation. Drahozal hit .402 with nine homers and 32 RBIs and compiled a 9-7 record and 1.68 ERA as a pitcher, while Breitbach hit .358 and patrolled center field like a sponge.

"The energy level has been good, the workouts have been good," said Price. "They're working hard and getting better every day."

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Maria Steffen, who went 9-5 with a 2.47 ERA last season as a freshman, tops the pitching staff. "She's gotten mentally tougher over the winter," said Price, who expects Steffen to be a leader as a sophomore.

Ellie Malecek (2-0, 1.45) enters the season as the No. 2 starter as the Saints prepare for the opener at Iowa City West on Tuesday.

Price is confident the left side of the infield will be in good shape again with senior Jamie Feltes (.275) at third base and junior Hannah Helms (.331) at shortstop. Price likes their leadership and communication skills.

Other top returning players are outfielder Charlotte Richards (.414), second baseman/outfielder Kailee Becker (.263), Cassie Himmelsbach (.260), catcher Steph Wehr (.228), second baseman/outfielder Keera Ball (.533 in limited duty), Maddie Morgan and Hannah Williams. Price expects a few younger players to enter the mix as well.