

## Solid pitching has Saints thinking state

Written by Jake Koolbeck

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The 2012 softball season is going to be a little different for the Xavier Saints.

But only a little.

One change is the Saints will be competing in class 4A this year and will not see many of the MVC foes in postseason play.

Xavier assistant Nikki Price says this changes nothing. "Our schedule mirrors last year's. Our schedule remains tough in the Mississippi Valley Conference and non-conference," Price said. "Regardless of class we will have to beat very tough teams to get to state."

Another big change the fact that Coach Brian Erbe will not be in the dugout or coaching third for at least a good portion of the season. Erbe suffered a heart attack earlier this month and underwent triple-bypass surgery. He miss the beginning of the season and possibly the whole season. It is unknown yet just what Erbe's role will be but he will still be involved.

"Coach Erbe's role this summer has not been determined at this time," said Price, who is charge in his absence. "Certainly he will be involved in some aspect as he recovers and until he is back on the field, not much has changed."

On the field changes aren't big in quantity but in quality. The Saints lost three-fourths of their infield, all of whom were major contributors.

That said don't expect a drop off from Xavier. The Saints are an elite team and there should be no change in that this season.

"We feel we are an elite team and one that has been very successful," Price said. "Nothing will be different this year."

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### **Key Losses:**

Xavier has three major holes to fill with the losses of three very skilled and experienced players all coming from the infield. Third baseman Abby Bedard, shortstop Tyler Sampson and second baseman Kristen Winter not only leave a gaping hole in the infield, but also took some very lofty offensive numbers with them.

Sampson (.455 average) was the team's top hitter last season with Bedard (.418 average) right behind her. The three big hitters combined for 151 hits, 106 runs, 22 home runs, and 113 RBIs. That is big production that will need to be replaced for the Saints' offense to be as potent.

At this point the Saints haven't decided who will fill the holes.

"The kids that played behind them have been working very hard and are excited about the opportunities and challenges that will be put in front of them," Price said.

### **Key Returning Players:**

Xavier has a big head start on most teams with the return of both starting pitchers from last year for a pitching staff that combined for a 1.74 team ERA. Junior Jacey Wiebold (15-8, 1.62) and freshman Erin Drahozal (14-5, 1.88) return to make the Saints pitching experienced and formidable.

The offense should have no problem slugging the ball around this summer with the return of many quality young hitters. Junior Audrey Richards (.375) is the veteran among the group of dangerous Saints hitters. Richards is joined by a pair of quality sophomores, Emily Walton (.354) and Courtney Colston (.351), and power hitting freshman Drahozal (3 HRs).

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Junior Jenna Schulte (.250, 3 HR, 24 RBI) is the lone returning infielder and her experience at first base should benefit the new Saints infield.

### **Outlook:**

Regardless of who comes in and who goes out Xavier is a Metro powerhouse year in and year out, and nothing changes this year.

There is no rebuilding. "We aren't rebuilding, we are reloading." Price said.

Xavier will have quality athletes fill the spots left by the departed seniors and the girls that return have gained experience.

The pitching is there and the bats will score plenty of runs. The Saints are my choice to finish second in the Metro behind Jefferson.

Although the Saints don't look like they have enough to get to the top the MVC (they are in the same division with Jefferson), I expect them to make a trip to Fort Dodge in July.

The Saints feel the same and don't fear the challenges ahead of them.

"We can't wait for the season to get started and we will attack all of the upcoming challenges head on," Price said. "We expect to be successful, compete for a conference championship, and end the season in Fort Dodge."