

## New look J-Hawks want to return to old haunt

Written by

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*(EDITOR'S NOTE: First in a series of preseason Metro softball stories. Next: Kennedy.)*



The Jefferson J-Hawks know exactly where they want to end up at the end of the season.

“We want to get back to the state tournament,” junior pitcher Hannah Petersen said. “Last year was obviously disappointing, but we all think that we can do it. We have really good team chemistry this year.”

Missing the state tournament is unusual for Jefferson. The J-Hawks are perennially one of the top teams in the state in softball, led by Coach Larry Niemeyer, who has racked up more wins than any coach in the country with more than 2,000.

This year's team is determined to get back after a disappointing loss with a tough draw in the regional tournament. The fourth-ranked J-Hawks had to travel to face No. 3 Muscatine in the final and got beat 7-2, to finish the season at 34-7.

“We just want to work hard and prove to everyone that we can do it,” said senior pitcher Katie Naber. “(And) prove to ourselves that we can do it.”

Leading the J-Hawks will be a strong returning pitching staff in Naber and Petersen. Naber led the team last season with a 16-2 record and 1.03 ERA, but Petersen was not far behind with a 17-5 mark, 1.28 ERA. Petersen, who has been the ace of the J-Hawks' pitching staff since she was an eighth grader, was second team all-state last season.

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“Our pitching will be our strength,” Niemeyer said. “I usually pitch Hannah in the first game because she throws harder and then we use Naber the second game because she has better control and can throw to spots.”

Another strength the J-Hawks hope to have this year is defense, though there will be all new faces in the infield this season.

Jefferson lost two all-state infielders to graduation last year in third baseman Alex Jacobson and shortstop Morgan Allee, along with second baseman Brittany Madsen and first baseman Kasey Yoder.

But Niemeyer said the team is confident that they will be just as stingy in the field this season.

“We spend an awful lot of time on defense,” Niemeyer said. “We hit a lot of ground balls, we spend a lot of time with our outfielders. I am a coach that believes that you have to have good pitching and good defense and then how many runs you score decides whether you win by one run or three or four runs.”

Where Jefferson most likely will miss last year's seniors is on offense. But Naber has complete faith in her teammates' abilities to pick up where last year's seniors left off. Allee hit .469 and Jacobson .403. Junior Kailey Drake is the top returning hitter with a .392 average and junior Rachel Sedlacek swatted five home runs last season.

“It is obviously hard because they are really good players, but this winter and this spring we have worked really hard,” she said. “All those players have been here practicing and trying to get better to be good replacements for the team. They have put in a lot of effort.”

Jefferson opens the season May 24 at home against Iowa City West.