

Lechner optimistic about Linn-Mar baseball

Written by Jim Ecker

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(EDITOR'S NOTE: Third in a series of preseason articles about Metro baseball teams. Next: Marion.)

Linn-Mar High School baseball coach Chad Lechner hopes a healthy combination of youth and experience will produce a successful season for the Lions this year.

Lechner's tentative starting rotation includes two juniors and two sophomores, so the Lions could be young on the mound. From Lechner's point of view, they're young but talented.

He has veterans at many of the other spots and likes what he's seen in practice so far.

"It's gone well. They're very upbeat," he said. "It's been a really good group so far. I think we're ahead of where we've been in some years at this time.

"It seems like maybe we have more returning experience than we've had for a while," he said. "And that certainly helps, not having to spend so much time on a lot of things. They kind of understand already what we want, what we expect. So it's going very well. I think we're very encouraged at this point."

Lechner listed Jake Stolley, Nate Greve, Keaton Blackford and Justin Wyant as his top four starting pitchers. Stolley and Blackford are juniors, while Greve and Wyant are just sophomores.

Stolley emerged as Linn-Mar's top pitcher last season when he went 2-4 with a 2.02 ERA.

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"He did a really nice job for us last year, so we feel confident he's our No.1," Lechner said. "I think he's an exceptional pitcher. Big, left-handed, still growing into his body. So we'll see how he does. I think he has the potential to be a high-level pitcher.

"And Nate Greve on the mound has been very impressive," he added.

Ben Larison pitched in nine games last season, compiling a 2-2 mark and 4.63 ERA, but Lechner said he'd like to keep Larison (.383) at shortstop as much as possible.

Linn-Mar's pitching staff finished with a 5.15 ERA last season and the defense committed 57 errors, two areas Lechner would like to see improved this season.

He thinks he'll have a strong outfield with Aaron Hunter (.303), Jordan Stroschein (.390) and Michael Redmond (.312), with Hunter in the middle.

"It's been a long time since I've had a team that I think is going to cover as much ground as we will in the outfield," Lechner remarked. "It's a really solid group defensively in the outfield.

"Aaron Hunter is a really good player," he said. "I see him as having a really tremendous senior year."

Unfortunately for the Lions, Hunter has been suspended for the first five games of the season due to a violation of school rules.

Lechner thinks Jeremy Danover will do a good job behind the plate for the Lions. He listed Corey Prokop as the likely second baseman, with Eric Bohr competing for playing time there as well.

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"We feel like we have a lot of experience up the middle, and usually that's a good starting point," Lechner said. "It's something to build off."

Larison has signed with Kirkwood Community College, Stroschein has committed to Ellsworth Community College and Hunter has committed to Rockford (Ill.) College.

Linn-Mar plays Xavier in the quarterfinals of the Metro Tournament on Monday, May 23 at Xavier at 7 p.m.

The Lions finished 14-22 overall last season and 9-16 in the Mississippi Valley Conference. Lechner looks to improve upon those numbers.

"I feel like we have more experience going into this year than we did last year," he said. "Now we have seniors who have played big roles, and even juniors that played big roles last year."

"Our goals are to get better every day, to be quite honest," he said. "I think that we can compete at a high level, but then there's a lot of good teams. We can come out on any given night and play well and maybe end up on the short end of it."

"I anticipate us being in a lot of games this year with an opportunity to come through, and that wasn't always the case last year, especially early on," he said. "This is probably the best feel I've had at Linn-Mar since I've come here at the beginning of a season, with the potential that's there."

Lechner joined the Linn-Mar baseball program as an assistant coach in 1998.