

Prairie baseball: 'The time is now'

Written by Jim Ecker

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(Editor's Note: This is the fifth in a series of preseason stories about Metro baseball teams. Next: Washington)



The Cedar Rapids Prairie baseball team is tired of losing. And losing. And losing some more.

Nobody seems to know how many years it's been since Prairie had a winning record in baseball. The answer is probably, "too long."

"Tradition can help you and tradition can hurt you," Coach Matt Thede remarked, "and our boys are sick and tired of it hurting us."

The Hawks might be able to do something about it this season. All the starters and all the top pitchers return from last year's club, giving the Hawks a blend of experience, depth and talent.

"Our motto is, 'The time is now,' " Thede said. "It's one thing to say it. To go out and do it is a tougher thing."

Prairie finished 13-20 last season, which was Thede's first year as head coach. Four more victories would have meant a 17-16 mark, so the Hawks were not far away.

"I really just want to get to .500," Thede said. "If we get to 20 wins, we'll take it from there. When we get to 20, we'll reset the goals."

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"We've never gone .500 in the Valley before," he said. "I think that's a reasonable expectation for us."

The Mississippi Valley Conference is stocked with strong teams. In fact, the state championship game last year was an all-Valley affair between Kennedy and Iowa City West, and both of those clubs appear to be strong again.

"If we can compete for the conference title in this conference, you're going to be competing for a state title," Thede said. "We want to be realistic with our goals, but our kids have high expectations."

Thede likes his pitching staff, but is adamant about throwing more strikes this season. The Hawks walked 177 batters in 33 games last year, compared to 182 strikeouts. That's more than five walks per game and nearly a 1-to-1 ratio of strikeouts-to-walks, which Thede thinks is way too low.

"It was pretty ridiculous," he said. "You're just not going to win that many games doing that."

Thede would like to see a 2-to-1 ratio, if not a 3-to-1 ratio, of strikeouts-to-walks. It all starts with throwing strikes. "That's got to be our focus for us this year, because I think we're going to have a pretty good darn defense behind them," he said.

Prairie hit .296 as a team last year and scored 5.4 runs per game, which is pretty good. But the Hawks allowed 7.8 runs and had a team ERA of 5.81, which is not good.

The Hawks also committed 63 errors in 33 games, which is nearly two errors per game.

Thede, 32, said the Hawks had "a great week" of practice when drills began on May 2. He said

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it was much better than the start of practice last season when he was the new head coach.

"The second year is definitely a lot better than the first," he said. "We're not teaching from scratch. We're maintaining and continuing to build."

Thede said Dustin Carlson (4-4, 3.50) and Anthony Gagliardi (3-3, 4.30) are his top pitchers heading into the season. "I think we have to ride them as seniors," he said.

He also listed D.J. Utley, Conner Steffens, Brendan Hammer, Chaz Boots and Justin Hofland as promising hurlers. "Yeah, we have a lot of pitching," he said. "I think the mound will be our biggest strong suit, if we can throw strikes."

Thede raved about his outfield with Boots (.288) in left, Jason Velvick (.418) in center and Gagliardi (.404) in right. "We might have the best outfield in the state," he said.

He likes Dustin Carlson behind the plate, especially with a 1.9 pop-to-pop time on his throws to second base. Brayton Carlson (.296) and Bryce Alberts (.250) are experienced middle infielders for the Hawks. Steffens also plays the infield.

Gagliardi and Dustin Carlson have signed to play at Southeastern Community College in West Burlington next season. Boots has committed to Wartburg.

Prairie will open the 2011 campaign against Mount Vernon on Monday in the quarterfinals of the Bob Vrbicek Metro Tournament. The game is scheduled for 5 p.m. at Kennedy.