

Predictions for Jefferson baseball in 2011

Written by Don Taylor

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Strengths

The Cedar Rapids Jefferson J-Hawks return six lettermen from last season, and Coach Mike Kuba sees that core as being the strength of the baseball team.

Kuba cited experience and leadership as traits his returning lettermen have that will be the baseline for this year's team.

The middle of the Jefferson lineup will be challenging to opposing pitchers, and it appears the J-Hawks will be aggressive on the base paths as well.

Jefferson also has a solid group of juniors to blend into this summer's squad.

An asset not to be overlooked: The J-Hawk program has a treasure of coaching experience that includes Gordy Nordgren and Randy Mathews, who both have head coaching experience in the Mississippi Valley.

Challenges

The biggest challenge for J-Hawks in 2011 will be filling the holes of the graduated seniors and making a smooth changeover while maintaining consistent play.

Kellen Sweeney, Matt Beer, Joby Frey, Luke Montgomery and Ben Rettenmeier accounted for nearly half the team's hits and runs and slightly more than half of the RBIs. Rettenmeier and Beer combined for 115 innings and a 14-6 record. Sweeney missed much of his senior season, but his example, leadership and work ethic will be missed.

Proven players

Tanner Unkel, an experienced infielder, and center fielder Michael Rooney are both in the top 20 returning hitters for the Metro area (among underclassmen) at .395 and .350, respectively. They also combined for 56 stolen bases.

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Drew Striegel will provide the J-Hawks with stability behind the plate and handle an experienced pitching rotation of Bailey Hollingsworth, Jordan McCormick, Chance Tiedtke and Rooney.

New faces

Alex Larson, a transfer from Cedar Rapids Kennedy, will work his way into the lineup at Jefferson. His energy level and versatility will contribute proven hitting and pitching skills to the J-Hawk program.

Juniors Eric Lehmkuhl, Sam Techau and Austin Goodell, and sophomore Ky Kramer are also seen as players who are expected to make significant contributions to the success of the season.

Expectations

"Getting everyone situated and comfortable in the positions they will best help us will be the early challenge," Kuba said.

"The key for us will be to develop confidence and chemistry. I see us as a team that will hang around in the top third and peak at tournament time."

If the young J-Hawks can blend in quickly and make key contributions that complement the efforts of their experienced players, Jefferson could have a solid season.