

Solid nucleus leads Cougars into 2012

Written by Don Taylor
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Kennedy is coming off a Metro best 31-9 season in 2011 and another trip to the state tournament, as I predicted. They also have an excellent nucleus of players returning.

The Cougars have a returning pitching staff that boasts 22 varsity starts and a 17-3 record in those starts. They have a tough 1-2 punch in the middle of their lineup as well.

Seniors Cody Bell (.381, five homers, 41 RBIs) and Devon Jacobus (.377, 10 homers, 37 RBIs) will spearhead the offense. Blend in a sophomore team that won the sophomore conference championship as well as the Metro Tournament, and that gives us a pretty good indication of where Coach Bret Hoyer's team will be located in the standings at the end of the 2012 season.

Key Losses:

The Kennedy losses are headlined by 2011 Gatorade Player of the Year Austin Christensen (.543, 19 homers, 52 RBIs, 8 wins). They also lost all-state infielder Terrell Sykes, outfielder Austin Benson, outfielder/pitcher David Yancey, shortstop/pitcher Griffin Michael and catcher/DH Matt Maiers.

They graduated 67 percent of their extra-base hits, 63 percent of their runs batted in, 63 percent of their runs scored and 136 innings on the mound. Clearly these numbers amassed by last year's senior class will be missed.

Key Returning Players:

Alex Hayden (8-1, 3.22) will lead an experienced pitching staff that will include Adam Lloyd (4-1, 2.86), Nick Appleget (3-0, 2.59) and Bell (2-1, 7.39). Hayden was a second team all-state performer in 2011 while Lloyd has a two-year varsity win-loss total of 8-1.

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Returning with infielders Bell and Jacobus are centerfielder Josh Jahlas (.302), utility player Logan Ambrosy (.355) and solid catcher Jimmy Lizarraga. A talented junior class will be led by Tony Maiers, a quality hitter with experience as a catcher who could serve as an excellent designated hitter, and Zach Johnson, a pitcher whose improvement last year makes him a consideration to crack the starting rotation.

The Kennedy coaches also are interested in sophomore Derek Jacobus, who they believe will challenge for a starting infield position.

Outlook:

Kennedy has the program and it has the tradition. The Cougars also have a solid pitching staff that is not overpowering, but is indeed formidable. Each pitcher understands fundamentals and knows how to pitch.

They have a proven catcher, and they have established leadership. Put all that together with a talented group of juniors and you have yourself a tough team to beat.

The Cougars are my choice for the second-best record in the Metro behind Marion, but they will be challenged by both Prairie and Linn-Mar. The Cougars could make it to Des Moines again this summer.