

SIUE baseball season begins with No. 2 Louisville on Friday

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SIUE at No. 2 Louisville

Fri., Feb. 19, 2 p.m.

Sat., Feb. 20, 1 p.m.

Sun., Feb. 21, 12 p.m.

Jim Patterson Stadium
Louisville, Kentucky

Probable Pitchers:

Friday: SIUE RHP [Conner Buenger](#) vs. Louisville RHP Kyle Funkhouser

Saturday: SIUE RHP [Jarrett Bednar](#) vs. Louisville LHP Brendan McKay

Sunday: SIUE RHP [P.J. Schuster](#) vs. Louisville LHP Drew Harrington

Broadcasts: GoCards.com/watch (subscription required)

EDWARDSVILLE - SIUE baseball opens its 2016 season Friday, and it won't be treading lightly into the new campaign.

The season begins with a three-game series at No. 2 Louisville. The Cardinals, who came within a game of the College World Series in 2015, finished last season with a 47-18 record. The Cougars then visit Memphis for a three-game series, Feb. 26-28. Memphis fell in the semifinals of the American Athletic Conference tournament a year ago and won 21 home games.

SIUE will face Missouri State, of the Missouri Valley Conference, March 4-6, in Springfield, Missouri. The Bears season also ended in the NCAA super-regionals where they fell to Arkansas. Missouri State won 49 games last season.

"We're going to test ourselves early," SIUE Head Coach Tony Stoecklin said. "We'll make whatever adjustments are necessary after those first three weekends and then we'll get ready for conference play. We will use those three weekends to make us a stronger club."

The Cougars are coming off their best [Ohio Valley Conference](#) season in 2015 – a 19-11 record and a third-place finish.

"It will be a really competitive league this year," Stoecklin said of the OVC. "I think there are seven or eight teams that can win the league."

SIUE will rely on an experienced pitching staff which returns seven pitchers from a season ago, including all three starters. Senior P.J. Schuster, who led the team with eight wins and 73 strikeouts will anchor the staff which includes fellow seniors [Ryan Daniels](#) and Jarrett Bednar. Daniels was an All-OVC pick following the 2014 season and made 15 appearances and 12 starts last year while battling injury. Bednar led the team with 15 starts in 2015 and has made 33 appearances and 23 starts in two years with the Cougars.

"I like the strength of our weekend starting pitching," Stoecklin said. "Factor in new recruit Connor Buenger and we have a good nucleus of guys who can start on the weekend and do a good job."

Buenger, a junior transfer from Southwestern Illinois College, was 11-6 over two seasons with the Blue Storm.

Seniors [Ryan Agnitsch](#) and [Zach Malach](#) return in the bullpen which also features junior [Mike Miller](#) and sophomore [Brendan Miller](#). The quartet of relievers combined for 57 appearances and 150 innings last season.

"We have guys with significant innings in crucial situations," Stoecklin said. "They have pitched at the back end of important ballgames and they know what to expect."

"You have to have a quality bullpen," Stoecklin continued. Starters go anywhere between six and seven innings, which leaves the seventh, eighth and ninth innings. To have a deep bullpen is really crucial to winning."

Pitching isn't the only place the Cougars will return experience. Three of last year's top four hitters also return. Sophomore [Dustin Woodcock](#), a freshman All-America last season, hit .306 with six home runs and 28 RBIs while making 48 starts in the outfield. Junior [Keaton Wright](#) hit .305, led the team with 15 doubles, hit six home runs and added 26 RBIs. Senior [Skyler Geissinger](#) hit .297 and added 13 doubles, two home runs and 27 RBIs.

"We essentially return the middle of our lineup from last year," Stoecklin said. "They've taken big at-bats in big games. Those guys know what to expect. They're not going to be surprised by any situation or unprepared."

While the Cougars have experience returning at key spots on the team, 14 newcomers, including 10 freshmen, will also have a hand in how the Cougars finish this year.

"Our basic recruiting philosophy is that we recruit high school players because we want them here for four years," Stoecklin continued. "They learn our system as a freshman and we typically get multiple good years from them on the field. As they progress, they start passing their knowledge on to the incoming group of freshmen."