

# Redbirds' baseball coach Haug excited about upcoming season with talent, work ethic of team

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer  
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**ALTON** – Alton's baseball team heads into the 2017 season with a somewhat inexperienced, but enthusiastic, team-oriented group, feels **Redbird coach Todd Haug**, who enters his ninth season at the helm with a game at GCS Ballpark in Sauget against Carbondale Thursday afternoon.

“We've had a tremendous off-season, a tremendous preseason here,” Haug said. “It is a very humble, team-oriented group – there's not a lot of ego out here; we're a little novice in terms of our time at the varsity in quite a few positions. We've had some success in recent years and I think there are a lot of people who are waiting to get their opportunity to leave their mark on Redbird baseball.

“We have a very deep pitching staff, we have some very key returners up the middle – the team is built very solid up the middle and I can't say enough about our coaching staff and the amount of preparation we've put in – we're ready to go.”

Last year's Redbird side finished 23-13 overall, 8-6 in the Southwestern Conference and reached the final of their own IHSA Class 4A regional before being eliminated by O'Fallon.

The Redbird coaching staff this year includes Pete Kleemann, who will take over for Nick Smith (who became the new head coach at Civic Memorial after Gary Bruening's retirement) as first-base coach and outfield coordinator; Steve Haug, who runs the Redbird bullpen and works with the catchers; Dennis Sharp, who will be the pitching coordinator and is familiar with many of the players thanks to his position as Alton Junior American Legion baseball coach; and AHS alumni Jason Roberts, who will help in a quality-control position.

“He's (Sharp) has done a phenomenal job with our pitchers,” Haug said. “They run a very, very disciplined unit. Jason was an all-(Southwestern Conference) performer for me in 2011 and played on a very solid team; he's wanting to give back. We can put him in a variety of positions and help out with a variety of different things.”

Five seniors are on this year's Redbird roster – Tyler Moxey, Steven Nguyen, Steven Pattan, Breyon Reed and Noah Zumbaum, with eight juniors (Cole Akal, Brandon Droste, Charlie Erler, Mike Hampton, Ben Mossman, Simon Nguyen, Shane Turner and Gary Volz) and six sophomores (Caden Akal, Alex Gates, Nathan Lemons, Michael Reeder, Adam Stilts and Robby Taul) also on the roster for 2017.

While the Redbirds will sport a deep pitching roster, the IHSA's new pitch-count rules and limitations on how much a player may pitch will enter into Haug's philosophy this year. “We have really evolved with the new rule of pitch counts,” Haug said. “With the amount of coaches that we have, we are always very mindful of how much people have thrown; we've always taken care of our players' arms. At the same token, now with really monitoring it with having log the amount of pitches on a daily basis with the IHSA and everything, we've kind of changed our mentality.

“We have dropped the concept of a pitcher-only; in years past, we've had five or six guys on the team where all they did was pitch. Now, everybody works out at a position and everybody is at least worked with as a pitcher. This year, we kept 19 guys and we could send as many as 14 of them to the mound; when I say depth, we've got a lot of arms.”

Volz was 8-1 last season as a sophomore on the mound, while Erler made 24 appearances on the mound last year and Haug projects him as one of the Redbirds' top starters this season, while Taul had an eye-opening season as a freshman last year in the field. “But people didn't realize he (Taul) was highly touted as a pitching prospect,” Haug said. “We just didn't use him much when he was playing second base as a freshman; he's going to be a big contributor for us.

“Adam Stilts has phenomenal control and he can throw four pitches at any time for strikes; Steven Nguyen and Simon Nguyen are going to be big for us; Tyler Moxey is going to be big for us, Alex Gates, Cole and Caden Akal – we've got a lot and lot of arms.”

Haug's thoughts on the new IHSA pitch-count rules are positive ones. “Anything that's going to monitor a player's well-being and health is outstanding,” Haug said. “At the heart of it, if you're doing something to monitor a player's health and well-being and to give them the best chance to have longevity in their arm, how can you have a problem with that?”

Haug believes that the Redbirds are going to be a solid team in 2017. “We're going to be one of the younger teams I've had in recent years, but age-wise, if you're good enough to wear the Bird on the Bat – arguably, my best player last year was a freshman – I don't want to say age has anything to do with it, this team is primed to do some good things.

“I think they'll be playing their best ball come tournament time; the expectation is we're in the upper echelon of the (SWC) and we're competing in the conference hunt; it's the best baseball conference in the state – I equate it to the SEC in (college) football. Anybody can beat anybody on any given day, so you have to put your work boots on and your hard hat on and go to work every day.

“This is the great labor of love; I love being out here with these boys. They're a tremendous group and we've got this beautiful new facility (Redbird Field); the sky's the limit for us this year.”

