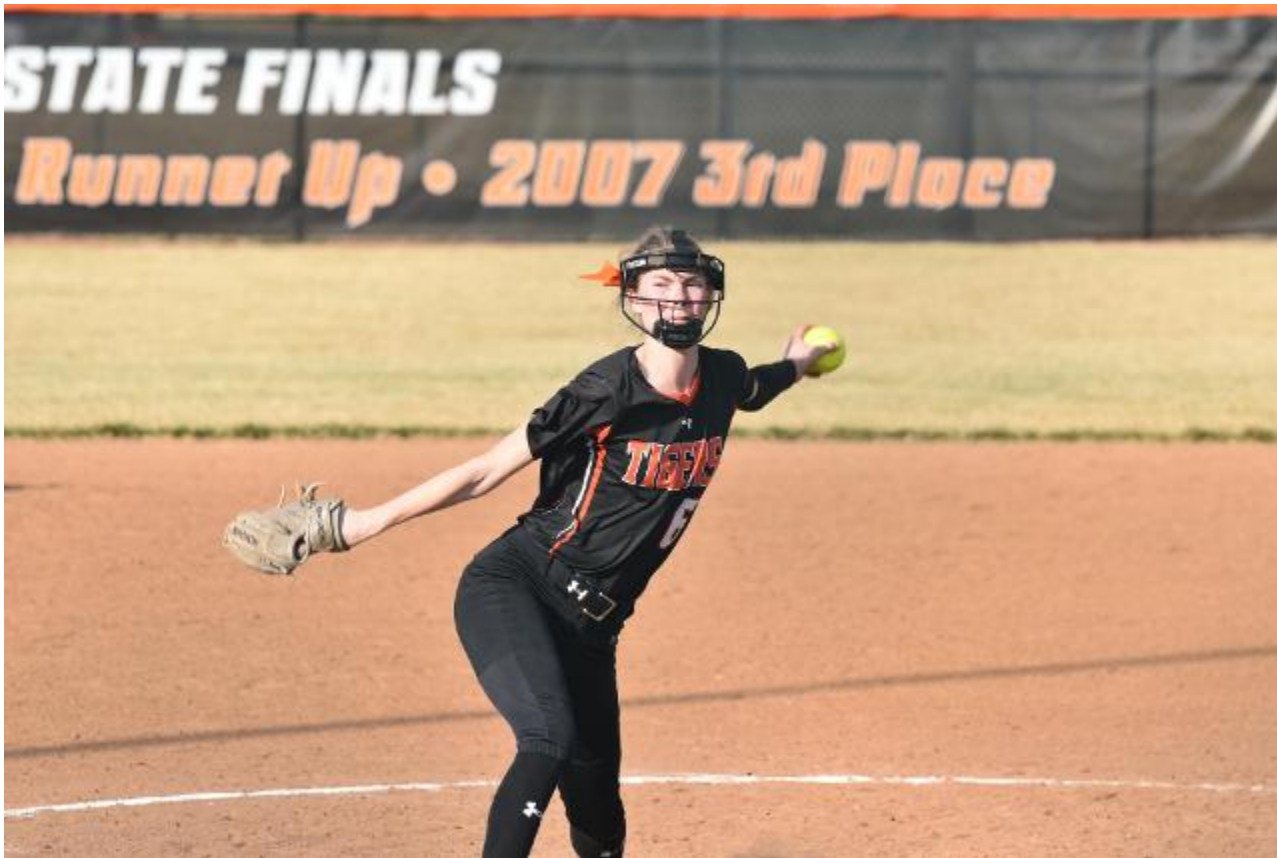


Experienced Players Return For Edwardsville Softball As Tigers Prepare For Upcoming Season, Three Pitchers In Rotation Will Be Important Key

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE - The Edwardsville softball team may have graduated some key offensive players last season, but the Tigers return many experienced players to the team as preparations move right along for the start of the 2022 season.

Edwardsville has been able to take advantage of some good weather at the start of March to get their work in, and hopes are high for another successful season as the Tigers come off a 21-6 campaign in 2021.

"The kids are working hard and it's a great group of kids to be working with, so I like where we're at," said Edwardsville head coach Lori Blade.

Things are looking good for the Tigers as they return many of their important players to mix in with younger talent.

"We'll be OK," Blade said, "We graduated a lot of offense and some really good kids. But we return a lot of good kids, too. So, we've got good pitching coming back, which is always a plus to start with, experienced catching coming back, and some experience in the infield and outfield both. So, we'll be competitive."

The Tigers return their top pitchers in seniors Ryleigh Owens and Brooke Tolle, along with junior Avery Hamilton, and it's a good pitching rotation. Some other younger pitchers may see some time inside the circle, but those three will make up the biggest part of the pitching staff. Owens was 7-3 last year with a 0.97 ERA, striking out 86 batters while allowing 17 walks, while both Tolle and Hamilton went 7-2, with Tolle fanning 60 and Hamilton 52. Hamilton's ERA was 1.69 while Tolle had a ERA of 1.84.

Lexie Griffin returns behind the plate, while Tatum Van Ryswyk comes back in the infield. Both players carry very good credentials, and Griffin will be backed up by Charlie Hayes, with Hayes and Syd Lawrence sharing time at first base. Van Ryswyk, Hamilton and Tolle will also be playing in the infield, with Owens. Zoie Boyd returns, and Emily Wolf comes back to play in the outfield after having missed the last two seasons due to injury.

"I'm really looking forward to seeing (Wolf) what she can do at the varsity level," Blade said, "with everything she's been through."

Jillian Lane, Jillian Hawkes and Grace Blakemore will also see time in the outfield.

"We've got a good nucleus of seven, eight kids in the outfield that will be rotating this season," Blade said.

As always, the schedule will be a very good and challenging one, with Freeburg and Rock Island going against the Tigers early on, along with the challenges from the Southwestern Conference clubs.

"We'll be tested, that's for sure," Blade said about the early schedule. "And in our conference, Belleville East will be as good as they were last year. So we'll see, but we just look forward to good weather and being able to get some games in."

As far as the SWC is concerned - it'll be just another great season to look ahead to in a very competitive league.

"Yeah, it'll be very competitive all the way around," Blade said. "So, we're just excited to be starting a normal season time and going from there."

The Tigers will rotate many of their players, and the learning curve will be great. Blade looks forward to seeing her players improve and grow as the season goes along.

"You know what? As I said, we'll rotate some kids and it'll be a learning process at times," Blade said, "with some inexperienced kids in some key positions. But we'll get better. And hopefully, we'll be ready when the postseason rolls around and go from there. But our goal, as always, is to win the conference and then, see if we can't make a good run in the postseason. Just very blessed to have the opportunity to coach this group."

