

SIUE Baseball returns a strong core for the 2015 season which begins Friday in Norman, Oklahoma.

by SIUE Athletics
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SIUE baseball opens the 2015 season with a three-game series in Norman, Oklahoma. The Cougars will begin the year with a first-ever meeting with Notre Dame Friday before facing Big 12-power Oklahoma in games Saturday and Sunday. The following weekend SIUE will take on Oral Roberts in Tulsa Oklahoma. The Golden Eagles were a 30-win team a season ago.

SIUE Head Coach Tony Stoecklin has long been a proponent of challenging his team during the nonconference season.

"It raises your toughness level," Stoecklin said. "Early in the year it gives us an idea of where we're at as a program when we play strong competition. We're not going to get better if we play someone we can man-handle in a weekend series."

A warmer than usual-January, and the offseason addition of artificial turf in the outfield at SIUE's Roy E. Lee field, means that the Cougars have seen many more days of outdoor practice than is typically the case to open the season.

"With the new turf, our outfielders have had the chance to get a good read on balls off the bat," Stoecklin continued. "Our infielders are getting a chance to throw across the diamond and work on their accuracy."

The 2014 Cougars won 21 games overall and enjoyed their best [Ohio Valley Conference](#) season since beginning to play a full schedule in 2011. SIUE earned the No. 4 seed in the postseason tournament after posting a 16-14 record in OVC play.

The Cougars head coach isn't shy about where he believes they can be at the end of this year.

"I honestly think we have the talent to be the best team in the league," Stoecklin said. "We also need to understand that talent alone does not win championships. It's about toughness; mental toughness. It's how you handle adversity when it comes your way throughout the season. That will be the key to this team's success."

Stoecklin returns a strong core of players from a season ago. The Cougars return eight position players that started at least half of the games last season.

Competition remains for three spots, but five positions on the field are essentially locked up with just more than a week to go before the season begins.

Senior [Nick Lombardo](#) will man left field as he did for 52 of the Cougars' 54 games in 2014. Lombardo led SIUE with 69 hits and was second on the team with a .321 batting average and 45 runs scored. His on-base percentage of .422 was third-best on the team and he tied for the team lead with 13 steals in 20 attempts.

"He's been there the last two years and it's his job," Stoecklin said. "He had a breakout year last year. He did an outstanding job in the leadoff spot."

Playing to Lombardo's left and likely batting behind him in the order is senior [Denton Reed](#), who will handle centerfield for SIUE. Reed led the team with a .344 batting average in 36 games last season. He led the team with a .447 on-base percentage and tied Lombardo with 13 steals.

"He's really turned into a solid Division I centerfielder," Stoecklin said. "He did an outstanding job in the two-hole last year."

Right field remains one of the three positions still up for grabs with sophomore [Austin Verschoore](#) and freshman [Dustin Woodcock](#) both in the mix for the position.

"Both will get plenty of opportunities to win the job early in the season," Stoecklin said.

Verschoore made 28 starts as a freshman and finished with a .222 average and 13 RBIs. Woodcock hit .411 with 38 RBIs as a senior at Jacksonville High School.

Three players will work for playing time on the left side of the infield. Returners [Skyler Geissinger](#) and [Jacob Stewart](#) will contend with freshman [Mario Tursi](#) for time at third base and shortstop.

Stewart, who Stoecklin calls "much improved from a season ago," made 45 starts at third base in 2014. He hit just .179 but added three home runs and 18 RBIs.

Geissinger started all 54 games at short in 2014 while hitting .263. He led the team with 41 RBIs.

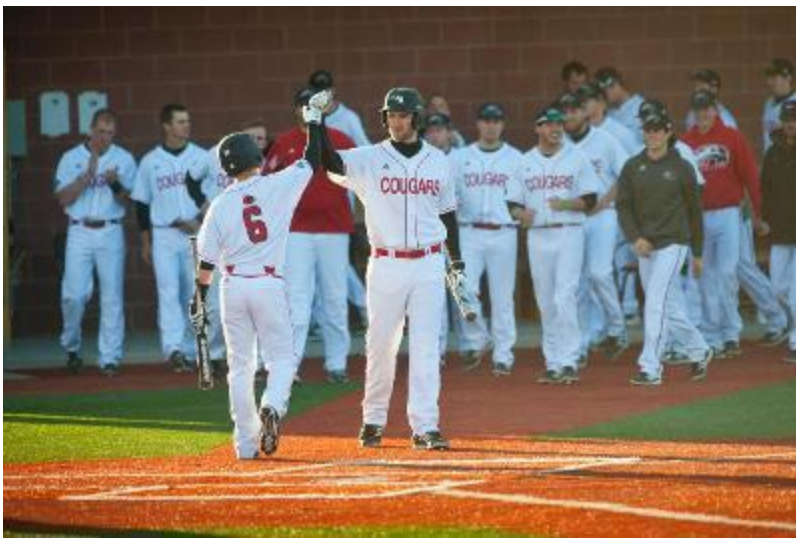
"The skill level is there," he said. "For (Geissinger) it's all about his mental approach to the game. If he comes out and competes every game with the right mind set, then he could be one of the best players in the league."

Tursi was All-Area Honorable Mention as a senior at Glenbrook South High School.

[Chase Green](#), the Cougars' fifth-year senior, will anchor the defense up the middle as SIUE's second baseman.

"He's improved every year since he has been here," Stoecklin said of Green. "Most importantly he's our team leader and he does a great job keeping the guys together."

Green hit .292 last season and was second on the team with 38 RBIs. His 66 hits were third-most and his team-high 18 doubles were good for fourth in the OVC.



Senior [Alec Saikal](#) will return as SIUE's first baseman. He started 50 games at the position in 2014 and hit .306 with 14 doubles, three homers and 29 RBIs.

"He had a very good year," Stoecklin said of Saikal. "He can have as good of a season as he puts his mind to."

Sophomore [Keaton Wright](#), an All-Freshman selection in the OVC last season, hit .294 in 52 games. He will be the Cougars' primary designated hitter according to Stoecklin.

"I think Keaton can make a big leap this year," Stoecklin said.

Senior newcomer [Parker Guinn](#), who hit .375 in 18 games at Washington last season, is slated to shoulder the load of the starts behind the plate for the Cougars.

"He has a veteran approach," Stoecklin said. "I like his presence behind the plate and how he handles our pitching staff."

That pitching staff will lean heavily on a pair of returners at the front end of the rotation. [Ryan Daniels](#), an All-OVC First Team pick last season, will be Stoecklin's No. 1 to start the season. Daniels was 7-0 in 14 starts with a 3.53 ERA. He led the conference with four complete games and was fifth in the league with 69 strikeouts.

"I know what I am going to get every Friday night," Stoecklin said. "I am going to get his best effort. I know at the end of the day he's going to go out and compete and give us a chance to win."

[Jarrett Bednar](#) made 18 appearances as a sophomore after transferring from Rend Lake. He had 35 strikeouts in 60 1/3 innings. Stoecklin said Bednar has made great strides.

"Jarrett is much improved," he said. "I am happy with his progress. It's not just that his stuff has gotten better; his approach, his mindset, and his confidence level have grown from last year."

[Travis Felax](#) will likely fill the role as the Cougars No. 3 starter. Felax missed all of 2014 with an elbow injury, was an All-OVC Second Team selection in 2013. He posted four complete games and had 58 strikeouts in 75 2/3 innings.

"Before his injuries, Travis was the best pitcher in the conference in my opinion," Stoecklin said. "He didn't have the results because as a team we didn't put up wins for him. If he's healthy he might very well be the best pitcher in the league this year."

Junior [P.J. Schuster](#) and junior transfer [Ryan Agnitsch](#) will figure prominently in the back end of the Cougars' bullpen. Following a successful season in the Northwoods Collegiate League, Schuster will begin his second season as the closer. Schuster had four saves last season and struck out 35 hitters in just 38 innings of work.

"P.J. is primed for a really good season," Stoecklin said. "(Playing this summer) Helped his confidence and helped him prepare to be a closer. Last year he was still trying to figure out what being at the back of the bullpen really entailed."

Agnitsch turned in a 2.12 ERA in 18 appearances at Jefferson College in 2014. He struck out 32 hitters in 34 innings.

"He's going to give us some quality depth at the back of the pen and some options as well," Stoecklin said.

Following their first-ever appearance at the OVC Tournament last season, Stoecklin said the Cougars expect to be there again in 2015.

"Last year was a good experience. I would have liked to have played a little deeper," he said. "Hopefully we learned quite a bit that we'll be able to use this year. When you get there it's all about who gets hot at the right time."