

Baseball Season Preview: Season Opens Friday

by Joe Pott

February 16 2023 3:32 PM



EDWARDSVILLE – SIUE baseball opens the regular season Friday when it begins a three-game series at Incarnate Word in San Antonio, Texas. The Cougars are coming off one of the best seasons since making the jump to Division I in 2009. SIUE won 27 games, the second-most at the Division I level for the program. Head Coach Sean Lyons

guided the Cougars back to the Ohio Valley Conference Tournament for the first time since 2015. For the first time ever, SIUE advanced in the tournament winning a pair of games.

Despite the success in 2022, the Cougars were picked to finish sixth (of nine teams) in the OVC.

"For the guys that return, the takeaway is that we have quality guys that play at a high level," Lyons said. "Now we have to answer the bell.

"We had a lot of momentum last year and we were picked sixth," Lyons continued.

"You can look at that as a negative or say, 'hey we have something to prove.'"

The Cougars lose three mainstays from a potent 2022 lineup. Brett Johnson was drafted by the Braves following the season, while Richie Well and Connor Kiffer graduated.

SIUE hitters led the OVC with a batting average of .303, ten points higher than any other season at Division I. The Cougars slugged .524 and reached base at a .384 clip both records at the Division I level. SIUE scored 430 runs, bettering the next closest season by 85 runs, despite playing just three more games. The Cougars established a new school record by blasting 99 home runs, which was good for second in the OVC and ranked 21st in the NCAA. SIUE baseball racked up 585 hits and 1,013 total bases, both good for program highs at the Division I level.

"The 4-5 guys we return to the lineup from last year is the strength at this point," Lyons said. "Brady Bunten, Josh Ohl, Brennan Orf, Avery Owusu-Asiedu and Ole Arntson are all guys that have a ton of returning at-bats."

Bunten, Ohl and Orf each were named to the All-OVC preseason team. The three position players selected were the most of any team in the league.

Bunten begins the year with 30 home runs, fourth all-time at SIUE and just five away from breaking the career record. He has 98 career RBIs which ranks 10th all-time at the Division I level.

Ohl hit .314 in 50 games last season and was fourth on the team with 64 hits. He added nine home runs and 39 RBIs. Ohl will make the shift to third base in 20223 after 90 career starts at shortstop.

Orf Led the team in hitting with a .357 average, good for seventh in the league. He led the OVC with a .492 on-base percentage while slugging .713 which was second on the team and third in the OVC. He was third on the team with 46 RBIs

Arntson was limited to just 30 games in 2023, hitting four home runs and driving in 17. In 2021, Arntson hit .321 with 11 home runs and 38 RBIs.

Owusu-Asiedu has 12 home runs and 56 RBIs in his first two seasons as a Cougar.

"As you look at those hitters and the maturity over the last three year as they've been in the program, you can see (they are going to be) a tough out," Lyons said. "We're hoping that the experience that those guys have can really put pressure on the other team or at least make every team earn the outs that they get against us."

Drew Mize hit .370 in 31 games last season and is expected to compete for the second base spot. Nick Terrell, a graduate transfer from Division III Ripon College also will compete for time on the infield. Newcomers Kyle Ratliff (outfield) and Chase Bloomer (shortstop) are expected to round out the SIUE lineup. Ratliff played at Lake Michigan College while Bloomer is a true freshman.

Brett Pierson will provide depth in both the infield and the outfield after appearing in a career-high 35 games in 2022. He hit .311 with three homers and 19 RBIs.

John Stallcup, who was limited to just 10 games last season thanks to a broken hamate bone, will slot in as SIUE's No. 1 catcher with junior college transfer Logan Smith also getting time behind the plate.

While SIUE may not duplicate its offensive output from a season ago, Lyons has confidence in its abilities.

"We have a lineup which is very potent and can put up similar type numbers," he said. "We have multiple guys who have the ability to hit double digit home runs. Sometimes you get lucky, you get hot, you get good weather-all the stuff that helps build those types of numbers. I feel pretty good that we have a middle of the lineup that is going to be pretty formidable."

On the mound, Jake Bockenstedt will assume the No. 1 starter after serving as one of the best stoppers in the OVC in 2022. Bockenstedt struck out 55 hitters in 49.2 innings. He was third in the league with 28 appearances overall and finished with five wins and two saves.

"We don't return a lot on the mound, but we do return Jake Bockenstedt," Lyons said. "He is going to transition into the rotation, and I think he'll have the opportunity to flourish."

Bockenstedt made nine starts for SIUE in 2021 and finished with three wins. Hayden Cooper, who made 12 starts at Southeastern Community College last year, also figures into the Cougars' rotation as does Teague Conrad, who finished with six wins at Heartland Community College last year. Freshman Garrett Helsel will get a look out of the bullpen, but also could find his way into the rotation.

A pair of Division I transfers will see their share of time out of the Cougars' bullpen. Tyler DeLong made 19 appearances and 10 starts for Austin Peay as a junior in 2022 and brings familiarity with the league. Zeus Ponder made 19 appearances and nine starts for UNC Asheville last year and has two years remaining for the Cougar.

Spencer Smith, Alex Sherer and Trent Glidewell all return from the 2022 team. Junior Jacob Kampf, who pitched at Heartland in 2022 could also see time out of SIUE's bullpen.

"We have a lot of newcomers," Lyons said. "We lost quite a few players from last year on the mound. (The pitching staff) is going to be a totally different look."

Lyons believes his team is learning to play with one another at the right time.

"Honestly, the biggest strength is the way that this group has come together," he said. "We had so many new faces in the fall. The way they've come together and worked as a team and the excitement and the energy that they bring to practice every day has been good for me to see as a head coach."