

Returning State Champions: Many Players Back From 2022 Baseball Team, Several Early Tests Ahead

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EDWARDSVILLE - The Edwardsville High School baseball team completed a historic season on June 11, 2022, with a 4-3 win over Mundelein to take the IHSA Class 4A state championship, its second in four years and the team's fifth overall, to finish 36-4 on the year.

As defending state champions, the Tigers have returned many of the key players from the previous year's club as Edwardsville prepares for the upcoming 2023 season.

Preseason practice is currently underway as the Tigers get ready for their season opener on March 16 at Tom Pile Field against Lockport Township. Edwardsville will play host to some games on the Illinois Prep Baseball Report Kick-Off tournament, playing their first three games at home over St. Patrick's weekend, along with five of their first six games as well.

As far as how preseason workouts have been going, it's been so far, so good for the Tigers.

"We're doing well," said Edwardsville head coach Tim Funkhouser. "We're working hard in practice each day, we've got some good weather for the most part and it's fun to see everybody on the field and get back to work."

Of course, the state championship from last season is in the rear-view mirror and it is a new season, one Funkhouser is very optimistic about.

"Well, we have a few guys that impacted our club last year on a daily basis," Funkhouser said, "and a few other guys that were either earning some part-time play or were right on the cusp of that. So it's fun to see where their roles have the ability to expand and grow as players. We've had a lot of guys just grow physically by working in the weight room and just overall growth. So it's fun to see, to start that process out on the field. I like the way we're going about our business."

It's going to be a typical Tiger team that works hard, respects the game of baseball in a high manner, and does things the right way, qualities that Funkhouser has helped to instill in the players.

"Well, that's the goal," Funkhouser said, "and hopefully we have some intentionality in that, but our guys like each other and they've really worked hard. That's a fun environment to be a part of."

Many of the players from last year's championship team return, chief among those being infielder and pitcher Riley Iffrig and outfielder Caleb Copeland, who are three-year varsity players.

"Riley played first base; he's even working in the outfield a little bit this year," Funkhouser said, "to expand his game. And then, Caeleb Copeland's been hunkered

down in right field the last couple of years and has been an important part of our lineup batting, as well as Riley. He's also playing a little bit at center, trying to expand his game as well."

Kayden Jennings and Cole Funkhouser return to the middle infield for Edwardsville, with both making important contributions to the Tigers' success in 2022. Andrew Hendrickson also returns, who played in the corners of the infield along with seeing pitching duties. Hendrickson will see time at third base and has swung a good bat and also has pitched well.

Lucas Huebner returns behind the plate to catch a very good Edwardsville pitching staff, and also was a productive hitter in the Tiger lineup. Sophomore Joe Chiarodo played in the outfield last season and made some big contributions in both the field and the mound during Edwardsville's postseason run, is also expanding his game and expect to see action in the outfield as well.

Sophomore pitcher Tyler Powell is also expected to make a positive contribution to the Tigers this season.

"He's done some good things," Funkhouser said. "And we have some various other guys on the mound. Logan Geggus is a guy who was shut down a little bit because of an arm injury in the last fourth of our season. It's good to see that his arm responded well and he's doing a lot better. We're hoping to have him ready for opening day. That's an exciting thing to have."

Jake Holder also pitched well for the Tigers last season and returns for his senior season, as does junior Alec Marchetto, who pitched key innings for the Tigers in the postseason run, also getting time at corner infield and he'll compete for a spot in the infield, along with being a key pitcher out of the bullpen. Other players expected to help the Tigers are sophomore Lucas Krebs, seniors Montrez West, Nick Bobinski-Boyd, Drew Freese and sophomores Danny Story and Carter Jackson.

The Tigers' schedule is the usual competitive one, where Edwardsville faces Chicagoland powers Lockport, Joliet Catholic Academy and New Lenox Lincoln-Way West in the first three games, then meets DeSmet Jesuit and St. Louis U. High at home, with the only opening road games at Granite City and Springfield Sacred Heart-Griffin Catholic in the first month. And then, there's the always-competitive Southwestern Conference schedule as well, and once again, it'll consist of two-game home-and-home sets on selected Tuesdays and Thursdays.

"Yeah, we're going to find out a lot about our club the first weekend," Funkhouser said with a laugh. "That's kind of what we want to do. So, we'll get right off the bat with the

Lockport one. If not 30 games, they won close to 30 games. And then, Joliet Catholic were state champs in (Class) 2A. Then, Lincoln-Way West had lost to (Chicago) Brother Rice (Catholic) in the Elite Eight game, super-sectional, which we were able to watch and they're a very athletic team, too. So, If you play three games in a row like that right off the bat, don't get a chance to really get your feet wet, but it'll be a good way to throw our guys in the fire. Our guys like competing and it gives our guys a chance to learn. If you play good competition, you learn from it and if you don't get the W that day, you take a lot away. Even if you do, you gain some confidence as well as taking away a lot of things to work on."

Overall, Funkhouser is looking forward to the upcoming season and it is full steam ahead for the Tigers as they prepare to defend their state championship.

"Our guys really understand the process well," Funkhouser said, "they enjoy lifting weights, even during the season. They enjoy doing the little things of trying to get better and they understand that they're not going to have it all in one swoop, but it takes a lot of practice and a lot of consistency, as well as physically as well as mentally, too. So the good things we get are baseball teaches you a lot about failure and how you can learn from it. We look forward to doing that."