



Edwardsville Softball Team Readies For Its Season With Returning Mix Of Youth And Experience, Hopes To Go Far In 2024 Season

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EDWARDSVILLE - The Edwardsville High girls softball team enjoyed another successful season in 2023, going 30-7 before losing to Bradley Bourbonnais in the IHSA Class 4A sectional final 6-3 at Normal Community High on Jun. 2 of last year. The 2024 edition of the Tigers lose only two seniors from last season - Avery Hamilton and Zoie Boyd - and return much of its roster in a good mix of youth and experience as the season starts on Tuesday with a home game against Freeburg.

Preseason practice has gone well for a fun-loving group of players who work hard and are very competitive.

"It's been really nice to get outside," said head coach Caty Happe. "The kids are doing a great job of competing, and they're a fun group of kids. So, glad to be able to get working with them, and it'll be nice to get a game in, and see somebody besides ourselves."

As per usual, expectations are high, and Happe knows her players will compete against the always-tough schedule, which features a number of schools that have good programs.

"Just to compete," Happe said. "We've got a tough schedule all the way around. So, the team you see day one is going to be different come May. Just to see gradual improvements, and the kids continue to compete and stay hungry throughout the season."

The returning players have vast experience, which will be an important factor as the season goes along.

"Yeah, definitely the experience is a good thing," Happe said. "We want to make sure that no matter what happened last year, you've still got to redefine yourself every year, and people know a little more about you. Hopefully, we've gotten a little bit bigger and stronger. So, coming out early, having some fun, and really working on some things to make the team better."

The top returnees for the Tigers include Riley Nelson, who hit .358 with 31 RBIs last season, and also will be the team's pitching ace, having gone 9-3 in 17 appearances and 13 starts inside the circle, having a 2.20 ERA, striking out 89 and walking 31. Happe hopes that Nelson will fill the number one pitching hole.

"That's great," Happe said. "A lot of experience there."

Edwardsville's keystone combo of sophomore Grace Oertle and senior Grace Blakemore also return, as well as senior third baseman Jillian Hawkes, and senior outfielder Jillian Lane. Oertle had a successful freshman campaign, hitting .394, with three homers and 26 RBIs, Blakemore hit .290, with 14 RBIs, Hawkes had a .321 average, socking two homers and driving in 32 runs, and Lane batted .400, with one homer and 31 RBIs.

"And then, really, we've had injuries," Happe said, "our seniors are kind of moving things around, so trying to fill those other spots from kids competing. And we've got a lot of kids who are very versatile, and can play different positions."

The underclassmen will also make big contributions to the Tigers' cause this coming season. Senior Graham Cobb-Gulledge, who hit .313 last year, with seven RBIs, leads the way, with senior Reese McNamara and sophomore Remi Warden splitting time as catchers, and junior Adalynn Follwell, sophomore Shelby Gorniak, sophomore Mia Semith, Brooke Burris, Sophia Antonini, Amelia Wilfong, Lilly Stone and Ali Brase also looking to contribute to the team's success.

It's a very deep roster, and that can be important when this year's IHSA Class 4A playoffs begin late May, extending into June.

"Yeah, it's a good problem to have," Happe said. "I tell them they make it hard for me every day, which is a good thing. So again, just keeping kids competitive and earning spots every day."

Of course, it's a very competitive schedule, with the usual fun and games in the Southwestern Conference, and very good non-conference teams, starting with Freeburg,

and also including Breese Central, Gillespie, Piasa Southwestern, Triad, Chatham Glenwood, Civic Memorial, Hardin Calhoun-Brussels, Effingham and Breese Mater Dei Catholic, among others.

"Yeah, so we're excited," Happe said. "A little bit of travel, see some unfamiliar faces, see some really good pitching, which hopefully will get us ready for May."

Happe is very hopeful for her club to be competitive and have a long run into the postseason while having fun at the same time.

"You know, you always hope better than the last," Happe said. "But we hope just to create some good memories, and hopefully, the girls have a great opportunity. And then, we put ourselves in a position to make a long postseason run."





