

J-Hawks seek 1st tourney berth since 1998

Written by Jim Ecker

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(EDITOR'S NOTE: First in a series of preseason Metro baseball stories. Next: Kennedy.)



The Cedar Rapids Jefferson baseball program lists all of its major accomplishments in school history on the pressbox at the J-Hawk field, but one of those categories has not been updated since 1998.

That's the category that lists trips to the state tournament. Jefferson's last trip happened 13 years ago, the longest drought for any Metro baseball team.

The J-Hawks nearly made it last year with a talented club, but they lost in the substate finals to Mason City, 3-2, on a bases-loaded walk to end their season.

"We were real close," Jefferson Coach Mike Kuba said. "That was a heartbreaking loss for us, a heartbreaking loss for those seniors that gave us five great years."

That club featured Matt Beer, Ben Rettenmeier, Joby Frey, Luke Montgomery and Kellen Sweeney, although Sweeney saw limited action after being drafted by the Toronto Blue Jays. Sweeney played in the substate loss to Mason City, but received an intentional walk on all four of his trips to the plate.

Those talented seniors are gone, but Kuba thinks he'll have another competitive team. "We're looking forward to the opportunity we have ahead of us this year," he said.



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Kuba does not want to call this a rebuilding year at Jefferson, but he's counting on new players to plug some holes. The J-Hawks finished 22-18 overall and 13-13 in the Mississippi Valley Conference in 2010.

"We've asked the junior class to kind of step up for us and kind of push the seniors a little bit, and they've done that for us," he said. "We lost some guys in some very key spots for us.

"Guys know that there are some holes to fill, obviously. And our coaching staff does, too. The juniors have a nice opportunity to come in and see what they can do."

Rettenmeier (8-2, 3.05) and Beer (6-4, 3.26) were the mainstays on the mound for Jefferson in 2010, but they're both at Kirkwood Community College now. Bailey Hollingsworth (3-3, 6.25), Jordan McCormick (2-4, 5.39) and Michael Rooney (1-3, 5.85) are the top returning hurlers.

"Our pitching staff doesn't have as much depth as it's had in recent years, on paper," Kuba said. "We have some guys in our younger class that are going to get some opportunities real early to show us what they can do."

Chance Tiedtke is one of the young pitchers who could get the ball. He struck out 12 batters in 9 2/3 innings last year with a 2.17 ERA in limited action with the varsity.

Rooney, a speedy center fielder, hit .350 and stole 25 bases last season. Tanner Unkel, a talented middle infielder, hit .395 and swiped 31 bases. Unkel played second base last year, but could see time at shortstop. Rooney has signed with Kirkwood and Unkel has committed to NIACC.



Jefferson stole 86 bases in 40 games last season, and Kuba expects to run again this year. "I'd say one of our strengths this year will be speed," he remarked.

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Kuba lists Drew Striegel (.234) behind the plate, but many other positions were still up for grabs as the J-Hawks entered the final week of preseason drills.

Kuba mentioned Drake Vanous, Alex Larson, Ky Kramer, Eric Lehmkuhl, Sam Techau, Austin Goodell, Christian Knox and Dylan Jellison as possible key players. Larson is a transfer from Kennedy, where he was a reserve on Kennedy's state championship team last summer.

Kuba has set high goals for the J-Hawks.

"Twenty-five to 30 victories is always a goal for us," he said. "Our first team goal is going to be the Metro championship. We're going after that. Our second goal is going to be the conference. And the third goal is getting to state. Those are three focus goals that we have each year."

Jefferson will be tested in its opening game of the 2011 campaign when it faces Kennedy in the quarterfinals of the Metro tournament at Kennedy on Monday, May 23 at 7 p.m.

"What better test to have right out of the gate, to see where we need to be, where we want to be and what we have to do to get better?" Kuba declared. "That's the way we view it."

"It's a challenge for us, there's no doubt about it. It's no easy task. We'll get measured right off the bat."

Kuba expects to compete with everyone.

"With the junior class we have, the well is not dry," he said. "We've got to get some guys in there and get them seasoned real quick."