

Yoder welcomes big softball class to Mt. M

Written by Jim Ecker

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Larry Yoder is extra-busy these days as the interim director of athletics at Mount Mercy University, serving as the temporary boss until a new person is hired sometime this fall.

He's also the softball coach at Mount Mercy and is anxious to begin preparations for the next season, especially with 14 brand-new freshmen in the program for the 2016 campaign.

Yoder has compiled a 161-120 record in nine years with the Mustangs. He's serving as the interim A.D. in place of Scot Reisinger, who accepted a new position at Mount Mercy this month as the dean of adult programs.

That means Yoder is juggling two full-time jobs during a busy period at the school as Mount Mercy prepares to move full-speed into the Heart of America Conference, continues with plans for the Plaster Athletic Conference and debates the merits of adding a football program.

"I've already found out in the first four days that this is really time-consuming, which I knew it would be," Yoder said this week, sitting in Reisinger's old office at the Hennessey Recreation Center.

Yoder and all the coaches at Mount Mercy are happy to help until a new athletic director is appointed, but he'll also be happy to devote all his energies to softball when the time comes. "I really enjoy coaching," he said.

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Yoder had two primary concerns on the recruiting trail this past year. He wanted to re-stock the pitching staff and wanted to find talented position players who can replace the seniors who figure to play prominent roles in 2016.

He thinks he succeeded handsomely.

"The main focus of this class was pitching," he said. "We don't have a superstar in there who you know will take over, but we have a ton of potential. We feel we have something to work with there."

Hannah Petersen, a senior from Cedar Rapids Jefferson, has been a top pitcher for the Mustangs during her career, but she battled a shoulder injury this past season and Yoder needed insurance and depth.

Petersen, Claudia Magana, Liz Moore and Tori Nimmo all pitched for Mount Mercy this year and are scheduled to return, but the staff compiled a 5.74 ERA and the Mustangs languished with a 19-27 record.

Yoder listed Samantha Croghan of Center Point-Urbana, Kaylee Walton of Davenport West, Whitney Baars of Muscatine and Tawny Menster of Anamosa as young pitchers with great promise. "All of the kids have a ton of upside," he said.

Croghan helped Center Point-Urbana place fourth at the Class 3A state meet this year. "I think she's going to be able to contribute right away," said Yoder.

The Mount Mercy and Center Point-Urbana softball programs are joined at the hip. John Olachnovitch, the head coach at Center Point-Urbana, is also

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an assistant coach for Yoder at Mount Mercy, and Yoder is an assistant coach for Olachnovitch with the Stormin' Pointers.

Yoder thinks it will be harder for an incoming freshman to crack the starting lineup on the field, thanks to a talented class of seniors, but it will not be impossible.

"We think we're in line to have a pretty good year this year," he said.

Twelve of the 14 freshmen are from Iowa and live within an easy drive of Cedar Rapids. Yoder signed players from Central City, Anamosa, Mid-Prairie, West Delaware, Muscatine, Davenport West, Williamsburg, Highland, Mount Pleasant, Waterloo West, Center Point-Urbana and Monticello. He also signed one player from Illinois and one from Wisconsin.

Yoder likes to see as many high school games as possible to land the best recruits.

"That's where you can make a connection," he said. "You have to get out and meet them, meet the parents. And you really want to get a good sense of what they're like.

"I don't have the budget to go to California and develop a relationship with those kids or watch them. Here it's easy to get out and see them play."

Yoder mentioned Morgan Craig of Highland, Kori Bohlken of Monticello and Kourtney Medina of Waterloo West as freshmen who could make an impact on the team as position players or designated hitters next season.

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Yoder is happy about his new class of players.

"You never know until everybody gets here, but on paper I'm excited about the depth it brings us. It fits the needs we have," he said. "We're excited about it. I think it's going to blend in nicely with what we have with the veterans."

FRESHMAN CLASS

Ashley Kerslake, Central City

Tawny Menster, Anamosa

Chelsea Kral, Mid-Prairie

Megan Collins, West Delaware

Whitney Baars, Muscatine

Kaylee Walton, Davenport West

Jessica Miller, Williamsburg

Morgan Craig, Highland

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Jena Stukerjurgan, Mount Pleasant

Kourtney Medina, Waterloo West

Samantha Croghan, Center Point-Urbana

Kori Bohlken, Monticello

Jocelyn Nimmo, Morton, Ill.

Tessa Ostendorf, Platteville, Wis.

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