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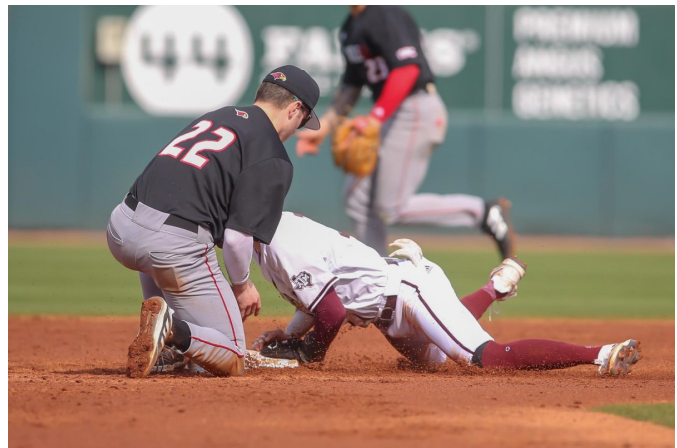
Seattle U Baseball to Lean on Upperclassmen in '24

Qasim Ali, Sports & Opinion Editor

February means Seattle University Baseball returns for another season, and they anticipate their most successful season in a few years. Last spring marked their best conference season record-wise (17-13) since 2016 and best record overall (21-32) since 2018. That renewed success didn't quite translate to the postseason, as the Redhawks crashed out of the Western Athletic Conference (WAC) Tournament in two games. They will begin their 2024 campaign at the University of California, Davis Feb. 16 for a three-game series.

Head coach Donny Harrel, who has been the skipper of this program since it was brought back in 2010 following a 24-season hiatus, attributed the recent success to a very simple factor.

"The thing people don't see from the outside looking in was just our health," Harrel said. "Our key guys did not break down or get hurt and we were very fortunate."



Sean Alexander



But the Redhawks will be going into the 2024 season without some major contributors from 2023. During the offseason, standout Freshman infielder Hudson Shupe transferred to Gonzaga, while Graduate Student outfielder Matt Boissoneault graduated after five seasons with the team. This meant the Redhawks had lost two of their top-four hit leaders, and two key pieces of their defense.



Senior outfielder Cole Kleckner remains optimistic about the Redhawks' chances at another competitive season despite the personnel losses.

"You're not going to find another guy like Matt Boissoneault, he was a great hitter for us. But I feel this year our squad, as far as age, puts us ahead of a lot of teams," Kleckner said, adding the team's goal is to win 30

games in 2023.

The Redhawks' experience is undeniable, as they retained four graduate students from previous years, including a key hitter in infielder Trevor Antonson, who had 28 runs batted in last season, and their leader in innings pitched and wins from 2023 in pitcher Peter Chronowski.

Kleckner, one of 22 upperclassmen on the roster, is a reason for optimism himself. In his first year with the Redhawks in 2023, he totaled 65 hits and 108 putouts—second and fifth on the team, respectively.

Harrel believes in his upperclassmen, as he is counting on even better seasons from Kleckner, Antonson and other leaders like Graduate Student catcher Grant Heiser to help fill the void left by Shupe and Boissoneault.

"These are guys that have been in the system for four or five years now," Harrel said. "[They] want to get it back to those days where we won the conference or we were a pitch away from a regional. So I think their ownership is a difference-maker for this year."

When you expand the scope to conference statistics though, Seattle U isn't particularly close to the top anywhere. They were 12th in batting average last year, seventh in team earned run average (ERA) and tied for eighth in putout percentage, but the team made plays when it mattered.

Chronowski believes the team's upward trend of season success will continue in 2024 because of their mindset more than any particular stat.

"One of our mottos we've had in the past is just 'hard hat, lunch pail,'" Chronowski said. "We're a team, we're a squad, we have that chemistry that other teams just don't have."

A season removed from a fourth-place finish in a competitive WAC, the conference's coaching poll slated the Redhawks to finish eighth in 2024. Kleckner believes the low ratings are just becoming a tradition—one the team embraces.

"This time last year we were ranked, I think it was like 12th or 13th, so that preseason is always kind of brutal with the Redhawks. But, I mean, we love it," Kleckner said. "Last year happened for a reason and I think it's going to be even better this year."



Harrel believes the same, and he says the returners as well as the freshmen additions will play a massive role. Freshman infielder Brandon Stinnett has been impressive and according to Kleckner, Chronowski and Harrel, he will strengthen a weakness from last year's team: extra base hits.

Extra base hits are doubles, triples and home-runs—things Harrel says the 2023 squad struggled to get consistently. But with Stinnett's strong hitting power, along with the return of Junior outfielder Jackson Reed—who missed the end of last season injured—Harrel believes this team can move forward with solid hitting numbers. And with the lineup's base running getting a bit faster, Harrel said it's been a goal to attempt more steals—a stat Seattle U ranked second-to-last in 2023.

In terms of defense, Harrel said the recipe to winning in the WAC is pitching depth. With the team's ERA lower than he would have wanted last season, and the team losing star pitcher Nestor German to the MLB Draft this past offseason, the Redhawks added pitchers to help address the issue—rostering 17 pitchers this year instead of 15 in 2023.

Still, returners will be the key. Sophomore pitcher Blake Smith is set to start on Fridays, Chronowski will take Saturdays and Sophomore pitcher Luke Alwood will start on Sundays, according to Harrel's season preview article.

Despite crucial losses on the roster, Redhawks baseball is coming into the season with a motivation to claim the WAC. Their 30-win goal is something that hasn't been accomplished in nearly a decade, but powered by veteran leadership, Seattle U Baseball is looking to have a banner year at Bannerwood Park.