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Softball: Doesn't take long for Eagles to break out the bats in opener

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Apr 13, 2021

New coach Alex O'Connor is ready to build on new success and enthusiasm throughout the Kennedy program

This spring Jefferson softball fans might recognize the next head coach at Kennedy as standout pitcher Alex O'Connor.

O'Connor was a five-year starter for the Jaguars under coaches Penny Witzenburg and Fred Wroge, making it to three state tournaments before embarking on a highly successful college career at Southwest Minnesota State.

She finished among the top pitchers in Mustangs history before graduating in 2017. She is second in career wins (48), games started (113), complete games (74), innings pitched (704 1/3), strikeouts (555) and third in career shutouts (11).

She's coached for various clubs and teams around the metro area most recently serving as the junior varsity and pitching coach at Eagan High School while teaching third grade at Indian Mounds Elementary School in Bloomington.

O'Connor applied for the opening after previous head coach Jim Leicht stepped down in February. A majority of the assistant coaches will remain on the staff, including Mike Kopischke, Mike Baker, Joe Salato and Amy Christansen. Sam Denuccio is a new addition, bringing more college experience to guide the program.

Eagles ready to fly

After a run to the Section 6-4A final game at Edina in 2019, Kennedy will look a bit different without pitcher Courtney Kopischke in the circle after graduating in 2020. She is pitching at Grand View University in Des Moines, Iowa and outfielder Cordy Ruch is at St. Mary's in Winona.

The team has senior first baseman Gabby Brown back after hitting .290 in 2019, along with a strong junior class led by a trio of starters, including pitcher/outfielder Brinna Kopischke and the middle of the infield in second baseman Ellie Baker and shortstop Taylor David. Sophomore Olivia Spencer was also one of the strong hitters in 2019, compiling a .300 batting average.

Freshmen outfielder Alli Pauly and shortstop/catcher Katie Edmonds have an opportunity to make an impact on the varsity team. Eighth-grader Emily Spencer will also work into the mix at third base and catcher.

The Eagles will look to build off a 9-4 record in the Metro West Conference, one of four teams with four losses and trailed only Jefferson (10-4) for wins. Kennedy posted a 13-9 record.

The team was eager to get the season underway after spending three days outside for practice before spring break. "It was so great to get out on dirt," O'Connor said. The team has 25 players between the junior varsity and varsity rosters. "We have a strong group of girls who come to practice every day ready to get better and they are

constantly hustling. We talk a lot about comping to practice ready to win each day.”

Dominant opener

Kennedy hit the road to open the season Saturday with a 17-8 win at Mound Westonka, pounding out 16 hits. Five Eagles had multiple hits, including David who went 4-for-6 with a seventh-inning home run and drove in three runs as Kennedy scored at least once in each inning.

Edmonds was on fire going 3-for-3 with three doubles and three RBIs while scoring twice.

Pauly drew three walks while Kopischke, Wheeler and Spencer each picked up two hits.

Brown and Edmonds teamed up for the lone double-play of the game.

Kennedy pitcher Mary Hajduk needed 98 pitches to earn the complete-game win giving up eight runs on 14 hits with three strikeouts and two walks. She tossed first-pitch strikes to 22-of-36 batters.

The Eagles opened the home schedule Tuesday against Jefferson at Kelly Fields and visit St. Louis Park Thursday for a 6:30 p.m. start. Kennedy returns home to face New Prague on Monday, April 19 at 4:30 p.m.

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