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Grafton softball team turns to speed, leadership change in quest for another shot at North Shore Conference title

After several near-miss seasons in pursuit of a North Shore Conference title, the Grafton softball team have reloaded this spring with another talent-filled lineup.

The Black Hawks also have someone new running the show.

Ken Hunt has taken over for longtime Grafton coach Stu Hannam, who retired after the 2011 season. In addition to filling in as a part-time coach with the Hawks' junior-varsity team for several seasons, Hunt has worked extensively with many of the players as an eight-year coach at the club level.

“I’m really looking forward to coaching the team,” Hunt said. “I think we have some outstanding players and can have a very good season.”

Grafton, which established itself as one of the conference’s top teams under Hannam, is coming off a 17-9 season that included a third-place, 11-3 finish in league play.

The Hawks lost several players to graduation, most notably two All-NSC second-team honorees — catcher Casey Assmann and pitcher Aly Bartel. However, most of the team’s 2011 starters are back, including two all-league first-team players — senior infielder Amber Tanski and junior outfielder Lauren Lennon.

Tanski, who hit .333 and stole eight bases in NSC play, will move from third base to shortstop this year. Lennon, who batted .385 and led the league with 23 steals, will again patrol center field and serve as a backup catcher.

Despite the loss of Bartel, Grafton's pitching staff has a pair of talented arms in sophomores Amanda Hunt and Emily Kabitzke.

Hunt, the coach's daughter, was the Hawks' No. 2 pitcher last year and earned honorable mention in all-league voting as a utility player/designated hitter. In addition to hitting .310 in NSC games, she went 2-0 as a pitcher with a 1.34 earned-run average and struck out 13 batters in 15-2/3 innings.

Kabitzke did most of her pitching at the JV level but will be counted on as a valuable backup this year.

When they're not pitching, Hunt and Kabitzke will split time at third base.

Grafton's other starters include catcher Sarah Fischer, first baseman Sheena Croatt and outfielders Beth Kottke and Samantha Majlio. Croatt and Kottke are seniors, Fischer is a junior, and Majlio is a sophomore.

Fischer was an NSC honorable-mention selection last year when she hit .262.

The second-base job is up for grabs, with junior Taylor Thiede, sophomore Jackie Corner and freshman Kate Lennon all vying for the starting spot.

"From a skill perspective, I'm confident with what we've got," coach Hunt said of his roster. "From an experience standpoint, we're a little young. We don't have a lot of depth, but I think we can score some runs.

"If we can play solid defense, we should be pretty good."

Speed should be one of the Hawks' best assets, according to their coach.

"I think we'll be more aggressive on the base paths than in the past," he said. "I'd like to see us play a little more small ball."

Defending champion Germantown and runner-up Homestead will again be among the conference title favorites this year, and coach Hunt is hoping the Hawks can give the front-runners a fight.

"I love the fact that we play in the North Shore Conference where we have a mix of Division 1 and Division 2 teams. We have a chance to go against some of the best teams in the state," he said.

"I anticipate some hard-fought battles again."

The season starts this week for the Hawks, who debuted with a Tuesday game against Cedarburg. They will play a 4:30 p.m. road game against Oakfield on Thursday.

Image Information: LAUREN LENNON will use her bat skills and speed to help spark the Grafton softball team this season. The junior outfielder was an All-North Shore Conference first-team selection last year, when she led the league with 23 steals. Press file photo