

SOFTBALL

Osakis looks to get back above .500

By Eric Morken
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The Osakis softball team is coming off a rare losing season from 2018 and is looking to get back on the right side of .500 with this year's group.

The Silverstreaks were 7-10 overall and 5-5 in the Prairie Conference last year. John Stigman, in his 21st season as coach, has a 254-150 record in his career, and he'll have all but three players in Harlie Falzone, Kali Giesler and Skyler Schmidt back from last year's group as they try to improve with a little more experience under their belt.

"We have a lot of questions to answer after last season's 7-10 finish," Stigman said. "We bring back our entire pitching staff. That should be a positive for us if we throw in and around the zone and are consistently doing so. If we struggle with our control, then we will be looking for the most consistent pitcher, not necessarily the most experienced."

Osakis has some experience back in the infield but does have to fill holes at first base and catcher. Giesler was a three-

year catcher for Osakis and Stigman said Laynee Hartshorn, a sophomore, will get that chance to fill her shoes.

"She is a hard worker and a very quick study to the position," Stigman said.

Sophomore Grace Oeltjen, freshman Lexi Klimek and senior Shea Olson will help in the outfield as others vie for playing time there too.

"Offensively, we look to improve the quality of our at-bats," Stigman said.

Stigman added that any success the Silverstreaks have this season will hinge as much on how well Osakis gels in the dugout as anything that happens between the lines on the field.

"In the end, for our team to take strides forward and succeed this year, we will need to build strong chemistry and bonds between each team member," he said. "If we can do that, we will have made a major stride toward success. With any team, talent can only take you so far. True success and accomplishment can only happen with great team culture, and that is our focus this year."

Stigman sees Royalton,



File photo
Osakis' Shea Olson throws a ball back to the infield during a game last spring. Olson is back as a senior this season to help out the Silverstreaks.

Browerville-Eagle Valley and Long Prairie-Grey Eagle as the teams to beat in the Prairie Conference this season. He also views Holdingford, Pillager, Royalton and Annandale as some teams that could compete near the top of Section 6AA come tournament time.

2019 OSAKIS SOFTBALL ROSTER - SENIORS - Shea Olson (OF), Kylie Anderson (IF), Jaden Klimek (P/IF), Aubrey Koep (OF), Morgan Herzog (1B)
JUNIORS - Cassie Lebrun (2B/OF), Chaeli Falzone (OF), Maddie Johanson (1B)
SOPHOMORES - Grace Oeltjen (CF), Tia Dykema (IF/P), Laynee Hartshorn (IF)

FRESHMEN - Haleigh Niehoff (P/2B), Kennedy George (OF), Lexi Klimek (OF), Sheilae Schmidt (IF/P)
COACHES - Head coach John Stigman - 21st year, 254-150; Assistant coaches - Brad Zimmel, Patrick Stier
OSAKIS SOFTBALL
April 2 at Annandale, 4:30 p.m.
April 4 at Foley, 4:30 p.m.
April 5 vs. Holdingford, 4:30 p.m.
April 8 vs. Melrose, 4:30 p.m.
April 9 at LPGE, 5 p.m.
April 12 at Paynesville, 4:30 p.m.
April 16 at Browerville-EV, 5 p.m.
April 18 vs. Staples-Motley, 4:30 p.m.
April 22 at Albany, 5 p.m.
April 23 vs. Swarville, 5 p.m.
April 25 at Royalton, 5 p.m.
April 26 at Sauk Centre, 4:30 p.m.
April 29 vs. Perham, 4:30 p.m.
April 30 vs. Upsala, 5 p.m.
May 2 vs. LPGE, 5 p.m.
May 3 vs. Browerville-EV, 5 p.m.
May 7 at Swarville, 5 p.m.
May 9 vs. Royalton, 5 p.m.
May 10 vs. Minnewaska, 4:30 p.m.
May 14 at Upsala, 5 p.m.

GIRLS GOLF

Knights experienced entering 2019 season

By Eric Morken
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The West Central Area girls golf team is a small group on varsity, but one that returns quite a bit of experience after last spring.

The Knights lost nobody to graduation from the 2018 varsity team and return



St. Martin

top player Jessica St. Martin to help lead the way. St. Martin, a sophomore, was a section qualifier and All-Quad County Conference player last spring. Lexi Poyzer was also all-conference last year as the Knights finished second in the league as a team. Libby Poyzer, Kate Wrolson and Emily Courier are also back after getting varsity experience under their belt. Courier, Wrolson, and the Poyzers are all seniors.

"This is a great group of girls who enjoy working hard and having fun together," 27-year head coach Kari Krefst said. "We are excited for winter to cease and enjoy good weather, sunshine and one another's company."

Krefst said she is looking for one of her junior high players to step up and take hold of the last spot in the varsity lineup. Ava Jahnke is a returning player for WCA, and Lexi Hunter, Chloe Hagen, Annika Solem-saas and Jenna Johnsrud are some newcomers looking to add depth.

"We are excited to bring back a strong core of five golfers who finished second in the conference last year," Krefst said. "Enthusiasm, experience, composure and work ethic are key positive attributes that (the girls) definitely possess. We look to Jessica's sound golf skills and the leadership of four strong seniors to give us a successful season."

Krefst said the short game is always something the Knights will focus on improving as the spring moves on.

"If we can make improvements there, our golf game and scores will vastly improve," she said.

Krefst sees Ottertail Central as the team to beat in the conference, while Lac qui Parle Valley returns a team that could be the front-runner in the Section 5A field.

KRUSE

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the toll it took on his parents struck just as hard.

"It was really sad for us to see what he would go through some days," Todd said. "But he never stopped working. I know how high school kids are. It was really hard for all of us."

When Tucker looks back at his time at CDH, he reflects on the core principles of being a student athlete.

"School came first," Tucker said. "In high school, I had classes and had to do homework. Working hard in the classroom is important."

When it was time for Tucker to hang up his Raiders jersey for the last time, he had his eyes set on junior hockey. A 5-foot, 4-inch forward with Asperger's is never going to be at the top of the list for a lot of scouts, but that didn't deter him from his goal.

"I just wanted to keep playing hockey," Tucker said. "Ever since I was a kid, I wanted to play college hockey. You have to go to juniors to do that. So that's how I ended up at North Iowa."

His time in Mason City

Two years ago, Tucker signed on to play with the North Iowa Bulls - an NA3HL team in the West Division.

North Iowa has been one of the top teams in the league for several years. While Tucker had his sights set on competing for a Fraser Cup, his parents were nervous about the transition.

"We had no idea what it would be like to send Tucker off to a place away from home," Todd said. "We had no idea how he would react living with a billet family or interacting with new teammates or anything. It was a leap of faith for all of us."

In his first year of juniors, Tucker played 26 games. He scored seven goals and tallied nine assists. After his rookie season wrapped up, his future in Iowa was uncertain.

"Their coach told us that Tucker was an awesome guy to have on that team and they offered to keep him around," Todd said. "They knew that he wanted to play in college and he couldn't promise him any more playing time. They asked Tucker if he wanted to get traded to a team that could put him on the ice more, and he said yes."

The Bulls traded Kruse to



File photo

Tucker Kruse eyes the net as he moves in with the puck during the Blizzard's 5-4 shootout win over New Ulm at the Runestone Community Center on Oct. 13.

the Blizzard following the 2017-18 season. Just as his parents became comfortable with his living situation, the fears of the unknown crept up once again.

"We didn't know if Alexandria would take to him as well as North Iowa did," Todd said. "They were so accepting of Tuck and his needs. Most of the guys on that team welcomed him in with open arms. To leave that behind made us nervous."

Unlike his parents, Tucker wasn't phased with the change of scenery. He saw Alexandria as another step in the right direction.

"There was no adjustment," he said. "Both organizations were great and it was an easy transition. The coaches on both teams were really good for me."

Arriving to the Blizzard

Tucker's playing time increased as he was promised.

This past season, he played in 46 games while recording nine goals and 21 assists. In game three of the first round series win over top-seeded Granite City, Tucker played the whole game on the second line. The chemistry he had with his teammates on the ice

allowed the Blizzard coaching staff to plug him into several spots as a versatile forward.

Sports are often poetic, and that was proven when the Blizzard drew a West Division championship series with his former team. Even though North Iowa swept the Blizzard to end their underdog run as the fourth seed, one sequence stood out to Tucker's parents sitting in the stands at the Runestone Community Center.

"Tuck has never been the kid to get in the scrums or cause some trouble on the ice. He's a rule follower," Todd said. "I think in his entire career since he was a kid he hasn't had more than a handful of penalties. In his last game on (March 23) we saw him get in the face of a kid that wasn't so accepting of him in North Iowa. That was a big step for him. That showed us that Tucker was capable of defending his teammates in that situation."

Blizzard forward Riley Scanlon and a North Iowa forward got in a shoving match after a whistle. In a situation where Tucker would have normally skated away, he stepped up for his teammate and got in the mix. A relatively normal hockey

play meant so much more to his parents.

"He's not confrontational. It's part of his Asperger's," Todd said. "In that moment, I could see how much he's grown. I was so proud of him."

As the final horn sounded, Tucker skated off the ice for the last time as a junior hockey player with nothing but positive things to say about the city of Alexandria.

"I felt that I played really well this season," he said. "We had a great team this year and great coaches. They brought me in with open arms and so did the community. I had a great time playing here."

Tucker isn't the kind of player who seeks the limelight, and he fit comfortably into his role.

"For me, my favorite part about playing in Alexandria was my teammates," he said. "We hung out every day at practice and at the billet houses. I made a lot of friends."

Not done yet

When Tucker sets his mind on something, he's going to get what he wants. His bulldog mentality has pushed him to work hard in

everything he does in hockey.

"The best way I can put it is he's like Rudy from the movie 'Rudy,'" Todd said. "He doesn't stop. It's just not in him to stop working hard. That's just Tuck."

His efforts have kept him in contact with Fellowship of Christian Athletes hockey director Rick Randazzo. Tucker spent the last three summers working with the FCA and becoming more in tune with his faith.

"He came out to our camp in New York about three years ago," Randazzo said. "His dad found out about us online, and since then he has gone to our camps and played on our FCA team."

Through his time at the FCA, Tucker has learned to garner the attention from his peers. He does so by being himself.

"Tucker is one of the hardest-working kids I've ever met," Randazzo said. "Other kids respect him because of that. His Asperger's doesn't matter because when they see him doing what he's doing, they respect him because he cares."

Tucker's future is uncertain. His goal is to keep playing hockey at Bethel University - a Christian Division III school in St. Paul. He has met with the coaches and toured the campus. All that waits now is an offer that he is unsure he is going to get.

"I just have to lean on my faith," Tucker said. "I would love to be a part of that program and go to college there. I know God has a plan for me."

Just like junior hockey, his time in college will serve a different purpose. Playing in juniors gave Tucker a chance to mature on his own. College will hopefully do the same.

"Knowing how much he will grow over that time is enough to send him," Todd said.

"This time we can send him off without being worried. That's because the people in North Iowa and Alexandria were so accepting of him."

Tucker's soft-spoken personality keeps the spotlight away from him. However, he strives to set an example for other kids who might grow up playing sports with disabilities.

"I would tell kids like me to not worry about their Asperger's," Tucker said. "Work hard, do your thing and be yourself. There's nothing wrong with that."