

BASEBALL PREVIEW



Barnum's JJ Stevens dives into second base safely during Thursday's baseball game with Esko. Photos by Dave Harwig / news@pineknotnews.com

Players fighting weather early on

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Mother Nature has not been kind to local high school baseball teams this spring. Cold, snowy and rainy weather has caused more than normal cancellations and postponements in the northern half of the state. The Pine Knot News this week caught up with coaches for a preview of local teams this season.

Cloquet

Cloquet head coach Tyler Olin is looking for improvement on a team that struggled to a below .500 record last season.

"We were 7-15 last year," Olin said. "We had six seniors who graduated from last season's team, two being big positional players and three being pitchers that threw a good amount of innings."

Despite the loss of six players to graduation, the Lumberjacks will return a solid nucleus of starters, plus other players who saw a lot of playing time last season.

"We have five returning positional players," Olin said. "I think our biggest strength as a team will be hitting, which will include seniors Mason Anderson (first base), Marshall Hayes (third base) and Alec Turnbull (outfield) in the middle of the lineup."

With limited pitch counts in high school baseball, it is imperative to have a deep pitching staff, and Olin has a large group to choose from.

"We have six senior pitchers and nine junior pitchers," Olin said. "We have lots of guys who will get innings."

The big question mark is which guys will turn into our top arms."

Olin said his expectations are pretty much the same every season.

"We want to win," Olin said. "It will be fun to see who steps up. We have a lot of guys batting for spots."

At least one Cloquet player is planning on playing in college.

Jack Sorenson has committed to playing for Century College next season.

South Ridge

The South Ridge baseball team had a dream season last year. The Panthers went 21-4 and won the Section 7A tournament before falling in extra innings in the first round of the state tournament.

"We lost two seniors who were a big part of our lineup from last year's team," said head coach Aaron Weber.

Despite those three key losses, the Panthers are looking at a strong team that could be knocking at the door for their fourth straight state tournament berth.

"We return seven starters and our entire bench from last year," Weber said. "Senior Aaron Bennett has played in three state tournaments and is our best pitcher, hitter, and shortstop."

Look for a big season again from Wyatt Olson — a solid hitter and catcher last year — as well as sophomore Christian Pretasky, who is a good first baseman and was a dominant pitcher last year as a freshman.

"We are hoping Pretasky can repeat that this year again as well as be a middle-of-the-lineup slugger for our offense," Weber said. "We are hoping to compete for a section 7A again this year and hopefully do some damage down at the state tournament."

As formidable as the Panthers lineup will be, South Ridge will definitely miss Jaxson Bennett.

"I am not sure what we have for school records, but if we have any I am sure Aaron Bennett will break them this year," Weber said. "Unfortunately, his twin brother, Jaxson, tore his ACL in football and will not be able to play this year. Aaron and Jaxson have been key players in three straight state tournaments. It really stinks not being able to watch him help us on the field, but he has been an important part of our season nonetheless as a leader in the dugout and during practices."

Cromwell-Wright

It's been 12 years since Cromwell-Wright fielded a boys baseball team, but the Cards are back and so is local coach Dean Levinski, a longtime coach in Cloquet for baseball and girls basketball. "It has been very much a

community effort to get these kids back on the field," Levinski said. "They've worked hard in the youth programs, where we have solid numbers, and they have helped out getting our fields ready for varsity baseball."

After starting a junior high program four years ago, the Cards now will take the field with a roster that includes one junior, two sophomores and a bunch of younger players.

"We will be young and could just play a junior varsity schedule, but it's time to get this thing off the ground," Levinski said. "We are really excited."

As with other teams in the area, the schedule will be crunched together — creating a need for a lot of arms on the pitching mound.

"We have seven or eight kids who can give us a couple of innings every game," Levinski said. "Actually, our strength will be in our pitching."

The Cards will rely on junior thrower Tate Blomquist to pitch and play centerfield. Sophomore Andrew Kachinske will be the regular catcher and can pitch when called upon. Another sophomore, Josh Lindman, will pitch and see time at first base. Look for freshman Brady Dahl to play shortstop and pitch while another ninth-grader, Dylan Nyberg, will be the utility man and can play a multitude of positions. Eighth-grader Eliyah Belden is being counted on to contribute heavily.

"I haven't seen any other teams yet, so I just don't know what our expectations are from a win-loss standpoint," Levinski said. "I just don't know how we'll stack up because we just don't have any varsity experience, but our goal is to make the guys really enjoy it so they'll keep coming back to play."

While Levinski has been involved in getting the team ready to play, the community has stepped up in big ways to also help the program.



South Ridge's Aaron Bennett throws a pitch while playing Esko at Superior High School on Thursday.

"We also lost one of our best players to injury in Jaxson Bennett, who was the first-ever All State player in school history."

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