

Lady Rams

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four were either All-CIAA or CIAA All-Tournament picks.

"We have a very good nucleus coming back," Gray said. "But when you begin to focus on the next season, you take the steps to build your team to be better than it was the year before."

In her recruiting, Gray's main point of emphasis is to build depth, especially at pitcher, catcher and the middle infield positions. This past season, the lack of depth hurt the Lady Rams over the course of a 45-game season.

To remedy that situation, Gray's focus will also include signing multi-positional players who can compete for playing time immediately.

"We need dominant players who can fill different roles," she said. "With added depth, we'll have enough skilled players on hand, so that in case of injuries, there's not a drop-off talent-wise."

You never plan for injuries. But you do prepare for the possibility. It's a huge plus to have good players who are ready to step in and get the job done."

The Lady Rams got stellar production from a trio of sophomores in 2015. All three delivered at the plate and as multi-positional players who did most of the pitching.

Mercedes Hargett produced all-star-caliber numbers as a vastly improved hitter. A year ago, she struggled mightily as a freshman with a .182 batting average. This spring, she firmly established herself as a long-ball threat on every swing. Hargett hit .411, led the CIAA in home runs (13) and was No. 2 in RBIs (40).

Chyna Riley (.395 batting average) is a converted right-handed hitter who has gotten comfortable swinging the bat from the left side. She ended the season with a conference-high 58 hits. As the season progressed, Riley got better as a slap-hitter to all fields. In the process, she's learned to take advantage of her foot speed, which enables her turn drag bunts into base hits.

Katherine Zimmer had a stand-out season and was recognized for her performance as the recipient of the Most Improved Player Award. Zimmer hit .346 and drove in 30 runs, which was second on the team behind Hargett.

Three freshmen showed much promise. Utility player Samantha Gibbs (.359) played well in 19 games, but missed most of the last half of the season due to a knee injury. Melissa Carillo made a smooth transition as the starting catcher who committed just two errors in 212 total chances. Throughout the season, Carillo continued to improve as a disciplined hitter. Anna Marino, an outfielder, got better as she gained more experience.

"When you look at Melissa's batting average (.271), it doesn't reflect the progress she made," said Gray. "She does an exceptional job of putting the ball in play and moving the runners. Anna, who came here as a right-handed hitter, had to get used to batting left-handed. It was a big adjustment, but over the final weeks, she played her best ball of the season."

Winston-Salem State's lack of depth had its biggest impact on the pitching staff. Entering the season, Gray had planned to use a four-pitcher rotation, which included three-time All-CIAA pick Monet Daly, Hargett, Riley and Zimmer. Those plans had to change. Due to ongoing knee and ankle ailments, there was a lot of uncertainty regarding Daly's availability as a pitcher. So, Gray shortened the rotation to three, and Hargett got most of the work (pitched 148 2/3 innings of the staff total of 276 1/3 innings).

Hargett (10-13, 3.86 ERA) was tops in the conference with 152 strikeouts and she was second in pitching wins. Riley went 5-8 with a 3.83 ERA. Zimmer (5-0, 3.44 ERA) proved to be effective and efficient.

"Each pitcher brings something different," said Gray. "Some bring speed, others have ball movement and pitch placement. We're looking to get more help in that area. You can never have too many pitchers."

As explosive as the Lady Rams proved to be with their bats, they showed tendencies to self-destruct with questionable base running. In games where WSSU had sizable leads, the mistakes didn't cause any damage. That wasn't the case in closely-contested games. Mental mistakes on the base paths were never more evident than in a 7-2 loss to eventual CIAA Tournament champ Saint Augustine's during the final weekend of regular-season play.

Trailing 5-0 in the bottom half of the fifth inning, WSSU scored two runs with no outs. From there things went downhill. Two base runners were picked off, which put an end to what could've been a more productive inning.

In the sixth, WSSU had the bases loaded with one out, but came up empty. An infield fly ball was caught for the second out, but the runner didn't get back to first base in time and was thrown out to complete the double play.

"Those base running situations are about being aware and being alert," said Gray. "It's to our advantage to make better use of our speed, so we can keep people on base and score runs. It's a part of the game that we have to get better at."

Track

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school track on a national scale.

These departing seniors aren't done with the sport. Ebony Williams (Clemson), Katlin Sherman (UNC), Erin Morrison (Hampton), Neteja Hale (UNC Asheville), Ila Mumford (Appalachian State) and Miaysha Bryant (N.C. Central) will attend college as scholarship athletes.

Over the past two years, the ladies have racked up team titles at four state championships (indoors and outdoors). Last summer they won a national outdoor title in the 4x200 relay and repeated as indoor national champs this past winter.

"The day went very well," said Coach Antwan Hughes. "I hate to see my six seniors leave. They did a great job and re-wrote the school record books. Because of them, the track program has accomplished things that had never been done at Parkland."

For the last couple of years, our folks have stepped up big when it mattered most. When you make it to a state meet, it's time to take it to another level. This year, these ladies took it to a level that I had never seen before. I'm very thankful for everything these young ladies have done for our program."

The state meet delivered a heavy dose of heart-thumping moments that involved Parkland's top performers. There were jaw-dropping, come-from-behind wins in four track events that helped the Mustangs win the team title in run-away fashion.

Sherman, the defending state champ in the 100 and 200, wasn't expected to repeat. Based on fastest times recorded, she was supposed to finish no higher than third in both events. In the 100 finals, however, Sherman had the final say.

For most of the race, Tamara Clark (High Point Central) and Sydnei Murphy (Apex) were locked in a tight battle for the lead and Sherman was a half-step behind. But over the last 10 meters, Sherman put on an amazing burst to beat both runners in a photo finish. The top three finishers were separated by .08 seconds with Sherman winning in 11.53, Clark (11.55) was the runner-up and Murphy (11.61) finished third.

"I kept telling myself, 'gotta win, gotta win,'" said Sherman, who competed at a high level all season in spite of a nagging ankle injury. "Near the end, I concentrated on picking up my knees, cocking my toes and pumping my arms as hard as I could. My adrenaline was pumping so hard that pain wasn't an issue. God told me I could win, so I knew I could do it."

Sherman, Clark and Murphy engaged in another tightly contested race in the 200. But the order of finish wasn't the same as the 100. Clark prevailed with a time of 23.69 seconds, Sherman placed second (24.02) and Murphy was third (24.03).

In the hurdles, Williams more than lived up to her reputation as one of the nation's elites. Williams overcame a wobbly start in the 100-meter hurdles to overtake top-seeded Gabriele Cunningham of Mallard Creek after both had cleared the last hurdle. Williams won with a state-meet record clocking of 13.44 seconds and Cunningham was second at 13.51.

"The start was horrible," said Williams, who was voted MVP of the state indoor track and field championships in February. "But I always come back at the end. So, I wasn't about to give up in that race. I just ran all the way through to the finish."

Williams earned redemption in the 300-meter hurdles. A year ago, she led in the final stages at the state outdoor meet, but ended up finishing last when she hit the next-to-last hurdle and fell.

This time, it was smooth sailing from start to finish. Williams (42.19 seconds) was pressed over the final three hurdles by Cary's Lakeisha



Photos by Craig T. Greenlee

Ebony Williams, right, dominated the hurdles races for the Mustangs.

Warner (42.51), but still won by a comfortable margin.

With the loss of six high-quality seniors, there's an assumption that the Mustangs days as viable state-championship contenders are over with. Time will tell. In the meantime, enter McKinley McNeill. At this year's state meet, McNeill, a junior quarter-miler, put on an eye-popping display that won't be forgotten any time soon.

McNeill won her first individual state title with a noteworthy victory over nemesis Layla White of Cary in the 400-meter dash. White won the outdoor state title last spring and she's the three-time state indoor champ at 500 meters. For McNeill, the win was even sweeter because she had never beat White in head-to-head competition.

"I've been on McKinley McNeill all year," Hughes said. "I told her on several occasions that she could beat Layla White. Finally, she put it all together and ran the kind of race that she's capable of running."

At the state indoor championships in February, McNeill came in with the state's fastest time in the 500 and White was second. The two ran neck-and-neck coming down the stretch, but White was able to hold on and win by a full meter.

A similar scenario unfolded at the outdoor state championships. White had a three-meter lead coming out of the final turn. McNeill waited until 40 meters to go before making her move. This time, she had enough reserves left to surge past White to win in a personal-best time of 54.31 seconds. White finished up with a 54.61 and Parkland's Erin Morrison ran 56.18 for third place.

"Coming in, I just wanted to better myself and focus on running my race," said McNeill. "At the indoor championships, I paid too much attention to what the other runners were doing and it worked against me. It was one of my goals to come out on top, so I'm glad to be No. 1 and have

a great time to go along with it."

McNeill applied the finishing touches on a memorable day when she delivered victory with her anchor leg on the 4x400 relay. Parkland was in third place and trailing front runner Southeast Raleigh by 25 meters when McNeill got the baton. At that juncture, it seemed that the best the Mustangs could hope for was a second-place finish.

McNeill gave chase and eventually closed the gap. She caught Sarah Hoffer of Cary on the final turn, and then pulled even with Southeast Raleigh's Eboni Roberson coming down the final straightaway. McNeill took the lead for good with 35 meters to go and Parkland (Morrison, Williams, Kimani Davis and McNeill) won with a state-meet record time of 3 minutes, 46.57 seconds.

In the sprint relays, Parkland expected to sweep the 4x100, 4x200 and 4x400 as it did at the 2014 outdoor championships. The Mustangs ruled the 4x200 and set a new state record (1 minute, 36.43 seconds) in the process. The foursome of McNeill, Williams, Miaysha Bryant and Sherman erased the previous mark set by Parkland two years ago.

The only relay event that didn't go Parkland's way was the 4x100. The Mustangs were the defending state champs, and they ran fast enough to set a new state record. Yet, they weren't fast enough to defeat first-place Mallard Creek, which is now the new record holder (46.69 seconds).

Sherman, the 4x100 anchor, came close to wiping out Mallard Creek's five-meter cushion. The final 25 meters was a mad dash to the finish line and Sherman barely missed pulling off what would've been a stunning comeback. Instead, Parkland (Mumford, Jahnae Bowman, Bryant and Sherman) was the runner-up at 46.85.

State championship notes



Chace Washington-Saunders of Reagan couldn't help but have mixed emotions at the state meet. On the one hand, Washington-Saunders was elated with his second-place finish in the 400 (48.95 seconds). He's also pleased that he recently signed to run track at Hampton University.

On the other hand, running wasn't the only object of focus for Washington-Saunders. His thoughts were split between competing for medals and reflecting on the time he was able to spend with his grandfather, Coy Saunders Sr. who passed away recently. The elder Saunders is one of the prime reasons why Washington-Saunders runs.

"I am so blessed to make it to the state meet," Washington-Saunders said. "But this wasn't just for me; it was for my grandfather. Now, I'm ready to move on to the next stage, so I can keep going forward with my career in track."

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Baseball

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Tyler Scarce to handle most of the starting pitching duties next week. In the regional six-team field, four wins are needed to reach the College World Series scheduled for May 23-30 at the USA Baseball Complex in Cary, which is the same site as this year's CIAA Tournament. At this juncture, it's not clear who might get the call to pitch the fourth game if the Rams should make it to that point. The likely choice would be between submarine specialist Hayden O'Neal and one of the three starters.

Righthanders Hatcher (8-1, 4.61 ERA) and Burton (5-1, 2.44 ERA) are proven commodities as starters. Scarce, a freshman lefty, who served mostly in a relief capacity earlier this season, has worked his way into the starting rotation. He replaces left-hander Jordan Carlton (4-4, 4.13 ERA), who's scheduled to have surgery next week to remove a blood clot in his throwing arm.

Scarce (4-0, 2.04 ERA) showed his mettle as the starter and winning pitcher in last week's 8-3 win over Virginia State in the conference tour-

namment final. In six innings, Scarce, an All-Rookie pick, allowed two runs on five hits with four strikeouts and no walks.

"In order for us to stay in contention, we have to get a lot of strong innings from our starters," said Ritsche. "If they can each give us 100 to 110 pitches, that should be good for six or seven innings. Then, we can turn to our bullpen to take over from there."

The bullpen has been reliable with Eric Corlette (6-2, 5.75 ERA), Jordan Cummings (6-3, 4.17 ERA, three saves) and Devin McLemore (5-2, 3.43 ERA, three saves) turning in solid performance in closing games out in the late innings. Aside from those three, Dylan Forbes and Austin Cole have responded well when called on to pitch in a variety of game situations.

"Pitching is our strong point," said Ritsche. "Our pitchers have worked so hard all year long to help us get to where we are today. They deserve to get the defensive backing that will help us win in the postseason. We're looking to ride our pitching all the way through the regionals and hopefully to the College World Series."

NCAA Division II Baseball Atlantic Regionals

When: May 14-17, 2015
Where: Erie, Pa.
Today (May 14)
Winston-Salem State (No. 4 seed)
vs. Seton Hill (No. 3 seed)
Friday (May 15)
If Rams win, they play Millersville or West Chester;
If Rams lose, they will play Mercyhurst or West Virginia State
Saturday (May 16)
To be determined
Sunday (May 17)
If necessary
To be determined

Check

www.wssurams.com
and www.ncaa.com
to get scores and pairings updates

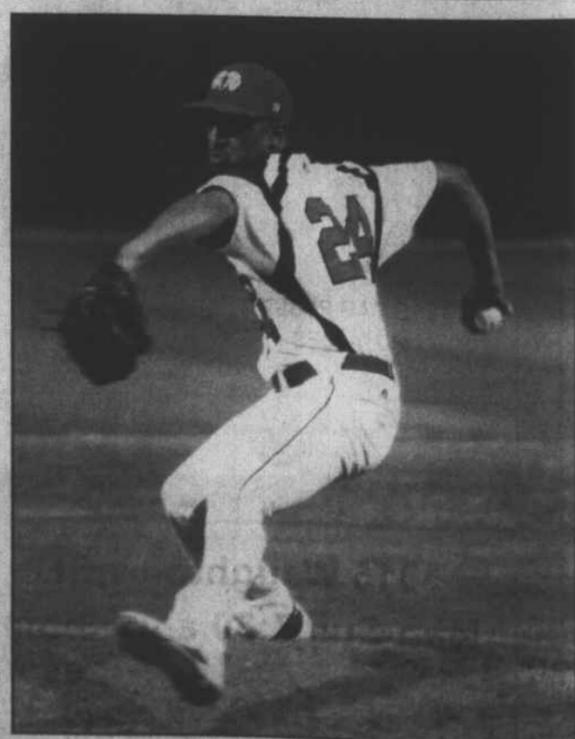


Photo by Craig T. Greenlee

Rams reliever Devin McLemore is 5-2 with a 3.43 ERA.