

SPORTS



Junior infielder Ryan Ogren swings and misses at a pitch during Elon University's 10-3 loss against the University of North Carolina at Greensboro May 2, 2017.

ALEC MANDELL | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

TAKE ME OUT TO THE BALL GAME

Baseball hopes changes will prevent fourth-straight losing season

Erik Webb
Sports Director | @ErikWebbElon

After finishing last season with a 24-32 (12-12 in conference) record, the Elon University baseball team looks to make some desperate changes to its process to prevent capturing the fourth consecutive losing season under the leadership of head coach Mike Kennedy.

Kennedy, who graduated from Elon in 1991, enters his 22nd season as the head coach at his alma mater. With a career record of 678-524-3 (.564), Kennedy has won the most games in program history as head coach, but he will have to make some changes to halt the skid.

Notable losses

The most obvious changes undergone by the team are those to the roster. This past weekend, the freshmen played their first game in the maroon and gold. But with gains come losses. The Phoenix saw nine of its players graduate last year, including outfielder Kyle Jackson and pitcher Jordan Barrett.

"We lost Jackson at the plate who drove some runs in for us and Jordan Barrett on the bump had a good year for us last year," Kennedy said. "Those are some areas that you're trying to make up and fix a little bit."

Jackson led the team in home

runs and runs batted in, and placed second among the Phoenix players in hits, runs scored and slugging percentage. Barrett ranked second on the team in earned run average (ERA), batters struck out and games started.

Kennedy was quick to call out the players he believes will fill the gaps left by the graduating faces.

"We're hoping that players step up and can be a run producer like Jackson was. Maybe [Hayden] Platt has a more consistent year and a full year when last year he really got going late in the year. He had a couple good at bats [Friday] and that helps us in the middle of the order."

To help make up for the loss, Elon's newest recruiting class could mean the appearance of seven new faces on the field. They include pitcher Daniel Albrittain, pitcher Shayne Clowar, outfielder Andrew Flint, pitcher Jeremiah Foster, catcher Matt Oldham, infielder Jack Roberts and pitcher Jared Wetherbee.

Finding the strike zone

Pitching will lead the Elon defense this season. Impressive performances from the starters kept the Phoenix within striking distance of Pennsylvania State University during the series this weekend.

"[George] Kirby's the dude - he's got good stuff. We're expecting those kind of outings from him," said Kennedy after the sophomore pitcher struck out 11 of the 20 batters he faced during the 2-1 loss against Penn State on Feb. 16. "That doesn't surprise me that he did what he did tonight. If [Brandon] Justice throws like that, he'll be a huge help for us. He threw ex-

ELON BASEBALL: BY THE NUMBERS

279

runs scored last year, compared to the 325 runs posted by opponents.

24

wins in 56 games last season (.429), marking the third-straight losing season for the Phoenix.

9

seniors who graduated after last season, replaced by seven freshmen.

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SOPHOMORE CATCHER

tremely well ... but he ain't been that good. That's good to get him going, confidence wise, and give us another option down in the bullpen."

When it came to hitting in that strike zone, the Elon offense struggled to keep up during its opening weekend of play. That came as a frustration to players like sophomore catcher Ty Adcock.

"We need to get our pitch early. Be smart. Don't chase out of the zone," Adcock said. "We're a much better hitting team than that. Pre-season we were hitting the ball and fall we were hitting the ball hard. We just got to get into our groove."

Preseason prospects

After the Phoenix capped off its third-straight losing season, Elon enters this year selected to finish in a tie for fifth place in the Colonial Athletic Association (CAA). The team is tied with the College of William & Mary, just behind Northeastern University and the College of Charleston. Though conference play for the Phoenix will not begin until March 23, a couple of players on the Elon team received recognition from the league.

Junior shortstop Ryne Ogren and sophomore starting pitcher Kyle Brnovich were both named to the Preseason All-CAA Baseball team after impressive seasons last year. Ogren was named the team captain and team MVP of the 2017 season. He was the only Elon player to start all 56 games, led the team and ranked second in the league with a .350 average as he recorded a league-best 78 hits and 21 doubles.

Brnovich, who was named

CAA Rookie of the Year in 2017, finished the season with a 3.00 ERA and held opponent batters to a .204 average. He struck out 10 batters in 90.0 innings, ranking second in the league in strikeouts and third in number of innings pitched.

The league selected senior catcher Hayden Platt as a honorable mention for the All-CAA team.

Schedule ahead

Having fallen in all three games to Penn State this past weekend, the Phoenix (0-3) looks to find some better mojo on its home field at Latham Park. The 56-game slate this spring will include 37 games at home, including meetings with 11 teams that made the 2017 NCAA Tournament.

The Phoenix will remain at home for the next five games, facing off against Big South member Radford University Feb. 20, playing a three-game series against Marshall University Feb. 23-25, and taking on Liberty University Feb. 28.

The first road trip for the Phoenix won't take place until the first weekend in March when the team travels to Georgia Southern University for a three-game matchup. The Phoenix will then return home for six straight games against North Carolina teams, including the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Appalachian State University and Eastern Carolina University.

March will also see the opening of conference play as the maroon and gold travels to CAA foe James Madison University for a series March 23-25.