

Return of All-American could spark UNC

BY RACHEL SODER
ASSISTANT SPORTS EDITOR

With a confident air, Jaclyn Holden stepped casually into the left side of the batter's box.

Readying her hands for the incoming pitch, she gripped the bat in fierce anticipation. Her tall, thin frame deceptively concealed the power she awaited to release upon the opposing team.

The pitch came in, and the first baseman crushed a double high and off the wall in right-center field for her fifth double in five games at the Triangle Classic last weekend. Defenders only could scramble to pick up the ball with hopes of limiting her to two bases.

The return of Holden is just one of the factors that could propel the North Carolina softball team to what the Tar Heels hope will prove to be one of their best seasons in recent memory after falling in the NCAA Regionals last year. Holden was crowned as a third-team All-American as a freshman but missed last season because of a shoulder injury which forced her to redshirt.

"I've seen her get stronger and stronger every week," said Coach Donna Papa. "I think Jack is somebody that's going to help us as we go through the season — just her knowledge of the game and being on the field and having some experience."

Holden's return couldn't come at a better time for the Tar Heels, with the graduation of former North Carolina standouts Emily Price — who set the UNC single-season home-run record with 16 last year — and Dionne Streete. North Carolina went 44-22 (6-4 in the ACC) with the combination last season.

Selected as third in the ACC preseason coaches' poll, North Carolina returns three starting pitchers and five starting players from last year's roster. During their 5-0 start last weekend, which included two come-from-behind wins, the Tar Heels displayed the type of team chemistry that they hope will continue throughout the season.

"You can't replace Dionne or Emily or any of them, really," said pitcher Crystal Cox. "But we've really found different strengths and worked on a lot of different things, and I think we've come together well."

The junior co-captain will take the reigns as the ace on staff after setting the single-season record for strikeouts with 297 last year. The achievement earned Cox an All-

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DONNA PAPA, UNC COACH

NCAA Regional Team selection in 2004.

"Crystal is just a competitor," Papa said. "She always goes out on the mound, and she is tough, and in two years, she's really made a mark on our program."

Cox will be joined by junior Alison Yin and senior co-captain Ashley Allen, who will look to make an impact now in her final season.

"(Ashley's) always been coming back from an injury and not ever able to really be strong starting a season," Papa said. "I think Ashley is going to surprise some people."

After struggling to put runs on the board last season, the Tar Heels will look for more offensive output behind the bats of Holden, junior Erica Ennis and senior Jessica Young. Young knocked in five home runs last season.

But much of North Carolina's thunder this year will spring from its young talent. Many of the sophomore starters saw action in 2004 and will bring that experience with them this season.

"We have a good freshman class, and the sophomore class has stepped up a lot," Cox said.

Papa also hopes to take advantage of a younger, quicker offense by stressing aggressive base running. Aside from experience, she said she believes the team won't miss much because of the solid work ethic they have put forth so far.

"I think every one has each learned they'll have to step up in their own leadership role," Allen said.

Part of the reason North Carolina has gained more confidence is the chemistry the team has developed early in the season. But Papa said the challenge for the younger players will be keeping focus throughout the season.

"We want to go pitch by pitch, inning by inning, those kinds of things," Papa said. "So I think if we can keep everything kind of a small focus, then we're going to be OK."

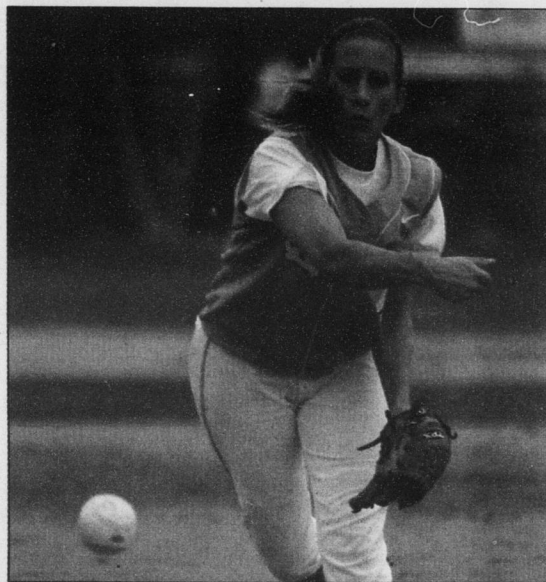
Allen echoed her coach's sentiments, emphasizing that even though the team is confident, plenty of hard work will be crucial

to putting together a successful season.

"Team wise, we're definitely working for an NCAA title, but even before that, we have to take each little section of the season at one time," Allen said.

This idea will be especially crucial when North Carolina takes on such big names as California, the preseason No. 1. But Papa said that with the nucleus of her team and the unity and heart her players have demonstrated, the Tar Heels refuse to "fold over and die" to the Golden Bears just because they are No. 1.

"I think that they have a lot of energy as a team, and they have worked really well together," Papa said. "They have really good chemistry, and besides having good talent, the chemistry is the glue that binds a team together."



DTH FILE PHOTO

North Carolina pitcher Crystal Cox will lead the Tar Heels' charge at the mound after setting the single-season strikeout record last year with 297.

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