

Mountaineers eye big year in baseball

Kings Mountain High baseball coach Bruce Clark has a situation most baseball coaches would love to have. He has all 18 players back from a team which won its conference championship a year ago.

Having that many returning players is bad news for younger talent hoping to make their mark on KMHS baseball, and it could also be bad news for the Mountaineers' opponents in the Southwestern 3-A Conference.

Clark, beginning his fifth year as Mountaineer coach, has won two conference titles and one state crown in his first four years. He has already chalked up 76 victories and could go over the 100-win mark this year.

Clark's veterans this year include pitchers Stephen Fisher, David R. Jenkins, David C. Jenkins, Shane Webb, Benji Ingle and Robert Wingo; catchers Kevin Melton and Chris Rider; infielders Damon Putnam, Lewis Nantz, Mike Smith, Todd Ware and Rick Marr; and outfielders Robbie Ruff, Doran Moore, Johnny Bunch. TG Goforth and Caja Ormand.

Clark had 56 players come out for baseball and will carry 20 on the varsity team and 24 on the jayvees. He said his most difficult decision as a coach this year will be cutting some good players.

"It's going to be a difficult decision," he said. "We have only two spots open on the varsity and we have nine 11th graders competing for them. We have 18 players back and 16 of them are seniors, so we could very well have six or seven juniors playing on the JV team. That makes it tough on the ninth and tenth grade classes. What we plan to do is, when we get ready to cut, if we've got a ninth or tenth grader that has equal ability with an 11th grader we're going to keep the ninth or tenth grader."

Clark will get the first look at his team in game situations next Tuesday when the Mountaineers host Fred T. Foard in a 4:30 p.m. scrimmage. Regular season action opens on Monday, March 15 with Kings Mountain visiting East Gaston.

The Mountaineers haven't gotten outside much in pre-season drills because of the weather. Clark said the team has worked mostly on



Coach Bruce Clark, right, hopes senior pitcher David Jenkins will be back in top form this year after experiencing shoulder problems the past two seasons. Despite his problems on the mound, Jenkins, also a designated hitter, led the Mountaineers in hitting the past two seasons and made the All-Southwestern 3-A Conference team both years.

conditioning and the fundamentals of hitting and catching.

"We've tried to put more emphasis on base running than we have in the past," he said. "But this has pretty much been a conditioning period. We're going to start this week on getting in our basic coverages as far as defense goes, and start working on hitting more and more as we get closer to the season."

Clark said the thing that has pleased him most about practice so far has been the players' attitudes.

"I've always said this bunch was not intense enough to win the whole thing," he said. "I don't know what it is about being a senior as opposed to a junior or sophomore, but they've come out with a different look about them this year and all of them are working very hard."

This group of Mountaineers, who have played together since they were about eight years old in the Recreation leagues, has always been known for their excellent de-

fense and consistent hitting. Last year, their pitching improved tremendously with Stephen Fisher going 12-0 and several others posting some big wins.

"I think this group will surprise a lot of people with their offense this year," Clark said. "They have worked hard in the off-season. This is as strong a bunch as we've had here."

"The pitching is as good as it's been since I've been here. The mystery of the whole thing is if David R. Jenkins is going to be able to return from his shoulder problems. If he does that, we really strengthen our pitching staff. If he can become a starter again we can relieve with people like David C. Jenkins and Robert Wingo, and have Shane Webb as a closer-type pitcher."

"We have four righthanders and two lefthanders," Clark continued. "We really have five righthanders if we use Rick Marr, who can also catch and play any position in the infield and outfield. If we can get

those two lefthanders (Ingle and Wingo) to come in there and throw strikes we're going to be alright. People just aren't used to hitting left-hand pitching."

Clark has four good assistant coaches this year, including JV coach Ronny Funderburke, Dean Brannon and Richie Gold who helped him last year. Joining them is Rusty Bumgardner, who was the pitching coach in 1989 when the Mountaineers won the state championship.

"We have an exceptional situation," Clark said. "We have five coaches. When you keep 20 players you can break them down into small numbers and get quality time out of them. We're happy that we can have that many people interested in what we're doing."

Clark admits a lot of pressure

Hit-a-thon Saturday at KMHS

The second annual KMHS baseball hit-a-thon will be held Saturday at Lancaster Field.

Beginning at 9 a.m., 12 noon, 3 p.m. and 6 p.m., groups of Mountaineer players will be taking a cut at 100 baseballs to raise money for the KMHS athletic program. Last year's event was so successful the baseball team funded its entire program and handed over additional money to the athletic department.

Players secure pledges for each base hit, with double money for a home run.

Mayor Scott Neisler will be a guest hitter this year.

There is no charge and the concession stand will be in operation.

"We invite the community to come out at anytime during the day and stay as long as they like," Coach Bruce Clark said. "This is an excellent way to watch the kids hit and see what we're going to look like this year."

In case of inclement weather, Clark said the event would be postponed until next Saturday.

will be on the Mountaineers as many hometown fans and others in the area are expecting KMHS to win it all after going 20-4 and three rounds in the state playoffs last year.

"The whole key to our season will be not trying to live up to what everybody's trying to say about us...that we're going to win every game and all that kind of stuff," Clark said. "In baseball, any given day somebody can look great or terrible."

"Everybody thinks we're going to be a pretty good baseball team, and we're going to try to be that," he said. "But to think we can go out and win every game may be pressing our luck a little too far."

Clark said he looks to South Point, which has a strong pitching staff, and Shelby, which has a host of good athletes, to be the teams to beat in the SWC.

"According to all the coaches around here, and some college coaches, South Point has the best

pitching staff in the conference," Clark said. "Our guys have finished second as sophomores and first as juniors, and still are not predicted to win the conference."

THE SCHEDULE

March 9 - Fred T. Foard (scrimmage) 4:30; 15 - at East Gaston, 5 p.m.; 18 - at Crest, 4:30; 20 - at East Lincoln, 4 p.m.; 22 - East Gaston, 6 p.m.; 23 - R-S Central, 7:30; 26 - at Shelby, 7:30.

April 2 - at South Point, 7:30; 5 - at Harding, 7:30; 6 - Burns, 7:30; 9 - at East Rutherford, 7:30; 12-17 - Gaston Neighbors Tournament at South Point; 20 - North Gaston, 7:30; 21 - Independence, 6 p.m.; 26 - at R-S Central, 4:30; 27 - Shelby, 7:30.

May 1 - East Lincoln, 4 p.m.; 4 - South Point, 7:30; 6 - Crest, 7:30; 7 - at Burns, 7:30; 11 - East Rutherford, 7:30; 14 - at North Gaston, 7:30; 17-21 - SWC Tournament at South Point; 25 - State tournament begins.

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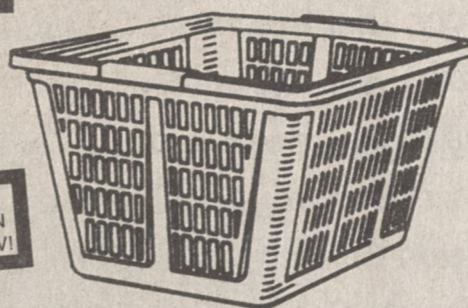


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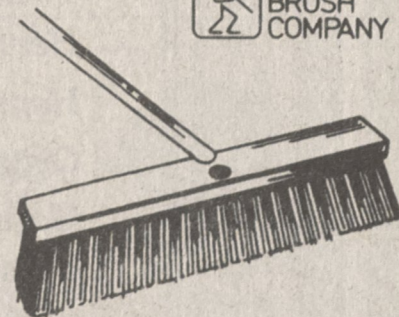
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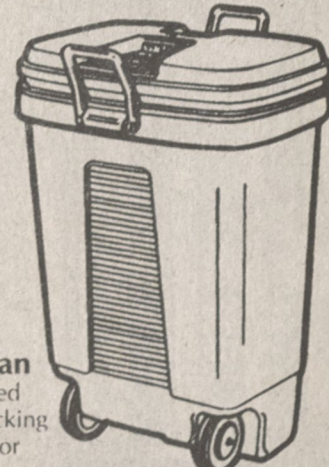
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