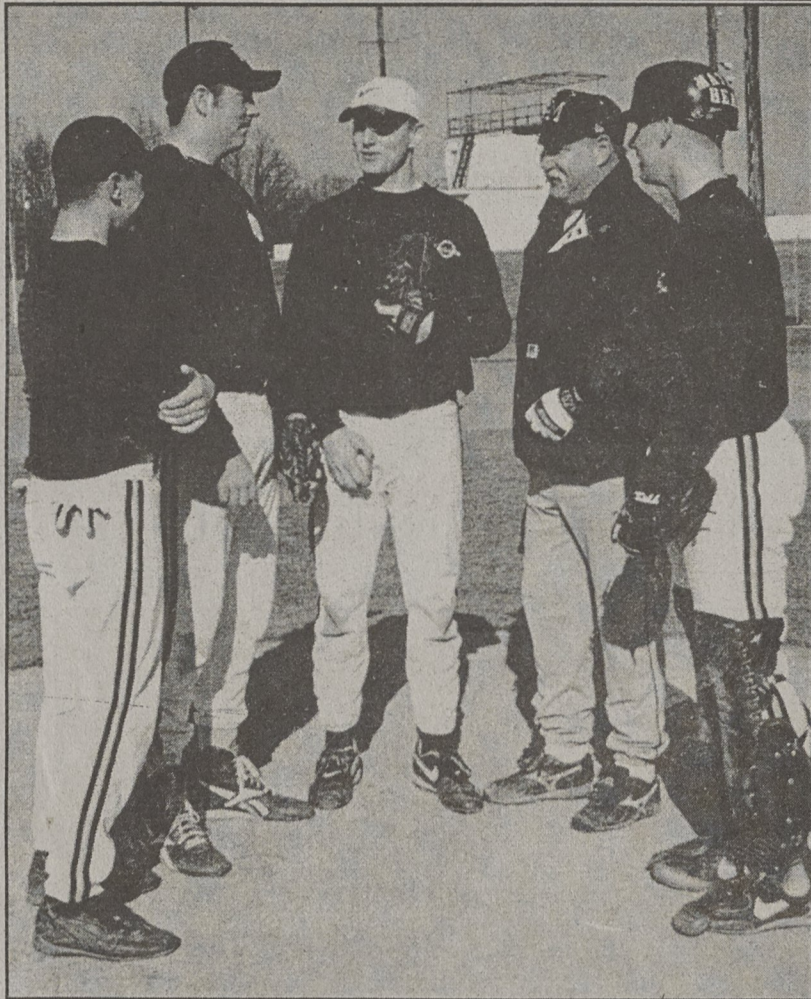


Young Mountaineers prepare for 2000 SWC baseball season



Kings Mountain High's baseball team faces a huge rebuilding task as it prepares for its fifth season under Coach Tony Leigh.

Leigh lost most of the players off last year's team which went three rounds into the state 3A playoffs.

Although he has mostly young players, Leigh says they are good players who work hard and he's excited about seeing them progress through the system.

Leigh has only a handful of returning players, including All-Conference first baseman Brian Thornburg, junior catcher Tyler Falls, third baseman Derek Dixon, shortstop Matt Bridges, and second baseman Jason Bridges.

His pitching staff - headed by present Gardner-Webb players Eric Boyd and Seth Denton - was all but wiped out through graduation. Senior Matt Biddix, who saw some relief action last year, is the only returning pitcher with varsity experience.

The Mountaineer outfield - headed by three-time All-Conference star Kendrick Bell -

was also wiped out by graduation.

Many of Leigh's prospects are still involved in winter sports and probably won't join the team for another two weeks.

The Mountaineers will host Blacksburg, SC in a scrimmage today at 4 p.m. and will begin their regular season February 29 at East Gaston.

Despite their youth, Leigh says he sees a lot of promise in the Mountaineers.

"All of the guys are working extremely hard," he said. "The fellows that were on the JV team last year played legion ball during the summer and are really starting to look good. Playing legion ball helped them a lot."

Leigh will look to a host of younger players like Trent Hopper, Brad Goforth, Alan Gibson and Derek Dixon to give Biddix some help on the mound. Most of those guys will be playing other positions when they're not pitching.

Kings Mountain looks strong in the catching department. Although he's just a junior, Falls was a full-time starter last year

on both the high school and American Legion teams, and when the wrestling season is over he'll have a capable back-up in Tyler McDaniel. In the meantime, ninth grader Tyler Allen will help out behind the plate.

Thornburg will be one of the best in the SWC at first base, and C.J. Van Dyke, who played JV ball last year, will see some playing time there too.

Jason Bridges will be one of the league's top defensive players at second base, and he and his brother, shortstop Matt Bridges, form one of the best double-play combinations around. Matt is still with the wrestling team and JV player Elan Philbeck will probably hold down the shortstop position until he returns. Gibson will play a back-up role at second base.

When Dixon's on the mound, Brad Goforth will hold down third base.

All of the outfield positions are up for grabs. Caleb Williams, a ninth grader, is looking good, and wrestlers

Shane Short and Matt Ash will soon be giving him some competition. Steve Halo and Jarvis Roberts are also seeking some playing time.

Torez Leach, who was a reserve last year, will probably hold down the centerfield position, and freshman Ross Ellis and Biddix will also see a lot of playing time somewhere in the outer pastures.

"We lost a considerable amount of talent off last year's team," said Leigh, "but we've got some pretty good young players out there. The biggest key is going to be the outfield. We have to replace everybody out there."

"If we have a plus it's having playoff experience," he added. "We made a good run last year. And our infield positions look fairly good right now."

Leigh expects the SWC to be as tough as usual, with teams like East Rutherford, South Point, North Gaston, Burns, Forestview and R-S Central looking having a wealth of talent returning.

Young KM softball team eyes good year

Kings Mountain High's girls softball team is young, but could make a run for another Southwestern 3A Conference championship this spring.

The Lady Mountaineers lost most of the starters off last year's championship outfit, and new head coach Rick Fortner has been working with small numbers during early practice sessions. But with the completion of the swimming and basketball seasons some new players are ready to take the field.

The only returning starters from last year are junior pitcher, Beth Bumgardner, an All-Conference selection, and shortstop Anna Ramey. Ramey hasn't practiced with the team yet due to participation in basketball.

Younger players who have looked good in ear-

ly practices include Kristin Hardin, Laurin Casuby, Haley Angel, Tabitha Goode, Jessica Hall, Wendi Johnson, Pam Parker and Megan Spicer.

Catchers Laura and Sarah Propst joined the team Monday off the KMHS swim team. Ramey, Ashley Leigh, Tisha Bell, Shonda Cole and Crystal Miller are still playing basketball, and Erin Dover will also be joining the team after completing driver's ed.

"The girls have been working hard on hitting," says Fortner. "We're putting in a lot of new ideas and some of the stuff, they don't really understand. But they're trying hard and that's all we ask."

Fortner, who had only 11 girls respond to his initial request for tryouts, said he'll have at least 16 players by the time the Mountaineers open

their regular season.

"That's a good number," he said. "Out of those 16 I have only seven returning players. We don't have an experienced team but we have a team that's doing everything we're asking of them."

Fortner will get a good look at his prospects in a pair of pre-season scrimmages. The Mountaineers face Country Day at home on March 1 at 4:15, and compete in a multiple scrimmage at Crest on March 4.

"I'm going to be missing six players at Crest because a lot of the girls are going to Florida with the chorus," he said. "So I'm really going to get to see some young girls in action. We'll find out how all the different players will fit into the system."

Fortner said he is preaching a "family atmosphere" and thus far has not received any com-

plaints from his players.

"We're trying to stress that if one of us does good, we all do good, and if we do bad we all do bad," he said. "We're not going to put any blame on anybody. If anybody gets the blame, it will be me because I don't have them prepared."

The Mountaineers open their regular season at home on Friday, March 10 against R-S Central. Those two teams battled tooth and nail for the championship last year, and despite Kings Mountain's youth most coaches expect the Hilltoppers and Mountaineers to be the top teams again.

"That's going to be a showdown," Fortner said, "and we'd really love to see everybody out there for that game. Whoever wins that one is going to be in the driver's seat."

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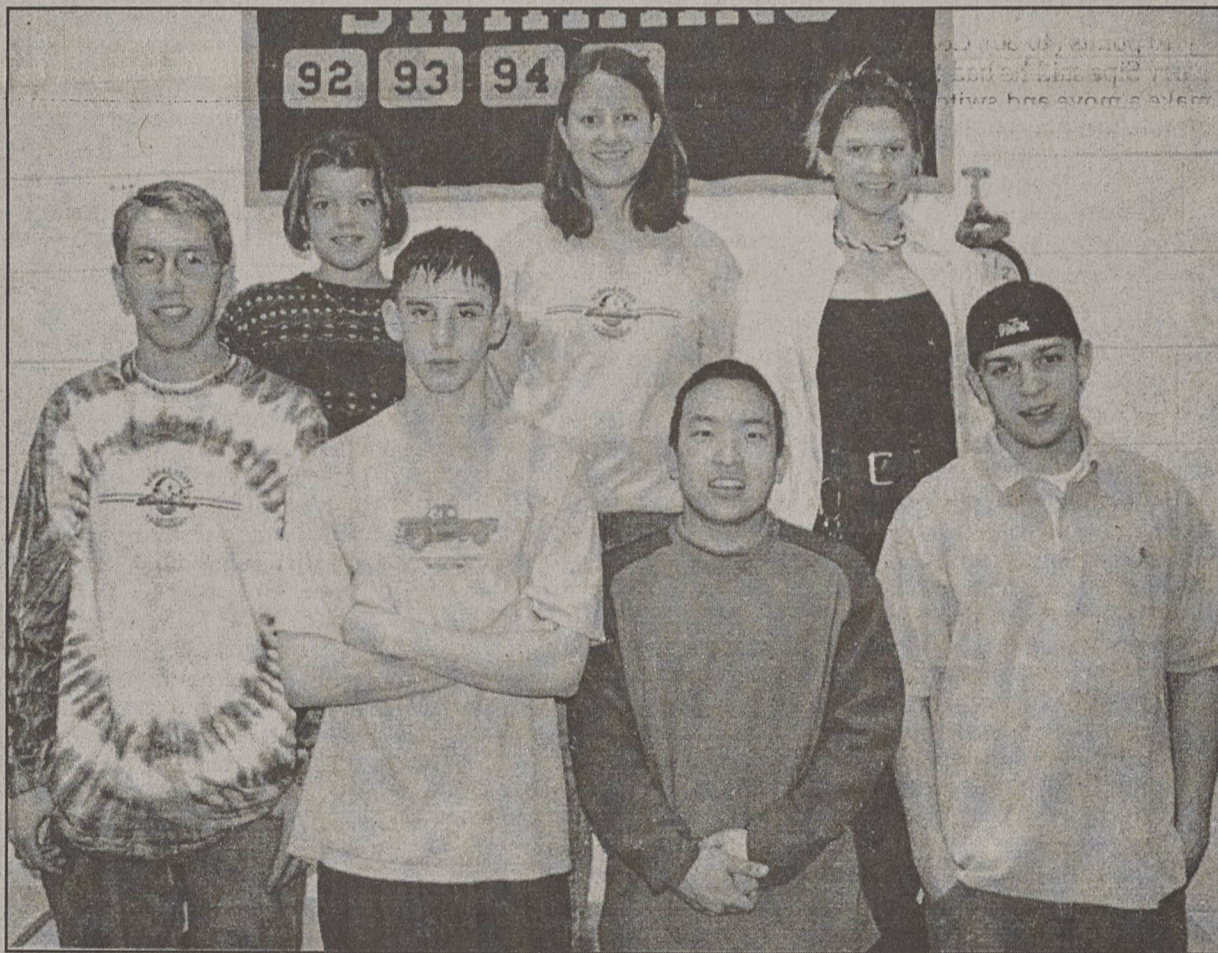
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GARY STEWART / THE HERALD
ALL-CONFERENCE - Kings Mountain High swimmers making the All-Southwestern 3A Conference team this season were, front row, left to right, Daniel Miller, Ben Sabetti, Naoki Nishiyama, and Trent Goforth. Back, Mollie Patterson, Wendy Neisler and Abby Haynes. Not pictured, Georgia Dawson and Isaac Marinho.

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