

## **2010-11 Wheaton Academy Softball Season Preview**

After recording only its tenth 15-win season in the 30-year history of the program last spring, and notching IHSA tournament victories in each of the last two years, Wheaton Academy softball will look to take another step forward in 2011. Moving ahead won't be easy as the Warriors will look to replace six starters who contributed heavily to last year's success, including catcher Olivia Tilly, an all-SCC selection and one of the finest softball players in the history of Wheaton Academy. WA will also be looking to do so while competing for only its second season in the challenging Suburban Christian Conference (SCC). WA will face what many observers believe is the most demanding schedule in the history of the program. Wheaton Academy will be coached by Todd Starowitz, who is entering his third year with the program. He will be assisted by second-year assistant Libby Thompson.

Since his hiring in October 2009, Starowitz has made it his mission to improve the competitiveness of the Wheaton Academy softball program. Inheriting a program that had won only four games (one by forfeit) the season prior to his arrival, Starowitz and his staff have labored to improve a roster that featured only eight players at the first spring practice in 2009. The Warriors went on to finish 12-17 that season, including 8-8 in the Private School League (PSL). Last season the Warriors finished 15-15 overall, including 6-10 in the much more difficult SCC.

"There is no reason why Wheaton Academy can't be highly successful in fastpitch softball," said Starowitz. "If we were competing at a school that hasn't had success in other sports -- or even succeeded recently in softball for that matter during (Wheaton College head coach) Chris Hudson's tenure -- it would be much tougher to sell the vision. Yet, Wheaton Academy has won state titles in multiple sports. We have great facilities like our Heritage Fieldhouse. We have an extremely supportive administration, not only in athletics but in the central administration. We have tremendous young ladies and families. We have the opportunity to building something really special here. Now it's up to us to go get it done."

If Wheaton Academy is going to continue to its improvement in 2010-11 it will have to do so

after graduating a talented senior class that included catcher Olivia Tilly, third baseman/outfielder Alison Koch, shortstop/centerfielder Julia Kolanowski, and leftfielder Ashley Pivaronas.

“That’s one of the great things, and also one of the toughest things, about high school athletics,” said Starowitz. “Girls move on and open opportunities for other players to step to the fore. With that said, replacing those four seniors, in terms of on-field-performance and off-the-field leadership, will be very difficult. As an illustration, three of the four seniors from last season hit home runs against Aurora Christian on Senior Day last spring. We aren’t going to be able to insert girls into the lineup that will necessarily be able to have that type of production. Those four girls were so instrumental in moving this program forward toward respectability. Now we just need to take the foundation that they’ve help build and take it to yet another level.”

## **THE SCHEDULE**

This spring, Wheaton Academy’s schedule will likely be the most difficult in program history. The Warriors will play seven games against IHSA Class 4A teams this spring (East Aurora, Roberto Clemente, Plainfield East (DH), Schaumburg, Rockford Boylan, South Elgin), 2010 3A super-sectional participant Guerin Prep on two occasions, 2A super-sectional participant Lisle, as well as SCC powers Chicago Christian, Immaculate Conception (featuring Indiana University commit Katelyn Conenna), Montini, Rosary, St. Edward (featuring Valparaiso signee Tarah McShane), and St. Francis.

“I love our schedule but it’s very demanding,” said Starowitz. “It gives us the opportunity to be successful but if we aren’t well prepared and if we don’t play well we won’t win many games because we’ve done everything possible to remove the non-competitive programs from our schedule. Non-conference games against teams like Lisle are great measuring sticks. I think the SCC will be tremendously challenging this season. It was very difficult last season because in addition to the “upper” division teams, the “lower” division featured two teams, Guerin and IC that exceeded everyone’s expectations and were every bit as competitive as the upper-division frontrunners. In addition to the Division I recruits like McShane and Conenna, players such as Rosary’s Brenda Rocha and Chicago Christian’s Bianca Gutierrez are tremendous high school

softball players who challenge you in all sorts of ways. Rocha and Gutierrez just give coaches headaches.”

One of the elements that should ease the transition for the Warriors in 2010-11 is the return of both starting pitchers: senior righthander **Paige Huizenga**, an all-SCC selection in 2010, who has earned a partial athletic scholarship to play at NAIA Dordt (Iowa) College, as well as junior lefthander **Kim Olson**, who earned all-SCC honors as a position player. Freshman **Michelle Ridderhoff** is a 5-foot-11 raw talent with a huge upside who will see action as well this spring.

Huizenga was the primary starter for the Warriors in 2010. She appeared in 25 games, finishing with a 13-12 record. She pitched 145.0 innings, allowing 181 hits, while striking out 164 and walking only 20. Olson battled through an injury-plagued sophomore season and finished with a 2-3 record and a 6.83 earned run average. Like many pitchers throughout Illinois last year she had some difficulty adjusting to the move of the pitcher’s plate from 40 to 43 feet, however, Olson’s significant potential was on display when the 5-foot-9 southpaw allowed 2A state supersectional representative Lisle only seven hits and two earned runs in a complete game 3-0 loss to the Lions late during the 2010 regular season.

“I’m really looking forward to watch the development of our pitching staff,” said Starowitz. “Paige had a really solid junior season and benefitted from the move to 43 feet. She mixes speeds well, has tremendous control, and is a battler. She really frustrated some good teams last season. Kim had a fantastic freshman season and just couldn’t stay healthy last season. She had a wrist injury early last season and within the last two years has fractured a bone in each of her legs. Kim’s extremely talented and very competitive. I’m just hopeful that she stays healthy because she needs to have a great junior season for us to be successful. Michelle Ridderhoff, a freshman, is going to need some time but she’s going to be a special pitcher.”

Offensively, the Warriors should be paced by Huizenga (.369 average, 5 doubles, and 14RBIs in 2010), Olson (.338, 5 doubles, 2 HRs, 14 RBI), junior centerfielder/third baseman/catcher **Bekah Heubner** (.309, 3 doubles, 2 triples, 1 home run, 19 RBI), junior second baseman **Caitlin Koehler** (.419 on-base percentage and team-leading 19 walks), junior outfielder/catcher **Jordyn**

**Hoepner**, and freshman shortstop **Marissa Gagliano**, who has extensive travel softball experience with the Wasco Diamonds and played varsity basketball for the Warriors this past winter.

“Offensively, we should have the ability to score some runs, albeit in a different way than last season when Olivia Tilly could hit one out of the park at any time. We have the best team speed that we’ve had since I’ve been at WA. We hope to find different ways to manufacture runs. Bekah and Kim both have home run power, while Paige has been a very productive hitter at the varsity level for a long time. Caitlin is a sparkplug from the left side of the plate. Last year she was a soft slapper but this year she’ll be a multiple-threat from the left side. Marissa is a freshman but has played a lot of softball and should contribute immediately at the varsity level.

“This is a team that could struggle mightily early in the season,” said Starowitz. “However, it’s a very hard working group that I think will be very competitive when May rolls around if we can stay healthy. We have good athleticism and better depth, although not as many headlining players.”

## **PITCHING**

Senior Paige Huizenga, a Dordt (Iowa) College signee, and junior Kim Olson will look to lead the Warriors in the circle in 2010. Huizenga, who has excellent command of several pitches, benefitted greatly from the move from 40 to 43 feet last spring. She appeared in 25 games, finishing with a 13-12 record. Huizenga pitched 145.0 innings, allowing 181 hits, while striking out 164 and walking only 20. Olson battled through an injury-plagued sophomore season and finished with a 2-3 record and a 6.83 earned run average. She allowed only two earned runs in a complete game performance against 2A supersectional participant Lisle. As a freshman in 2009, Olson allowed only 80 hits in 87.1 innings, while walking 37 and striking out 101. She threw a five-inning no-hitter in a 6-0 win over Luther North on April 29, 2009. Talented 5-foot-11 freshman Michelle Ridderhoff will also see some action in the circle.

**Starowitz on the Wheaton Academy pitching staff:** *“We went into last season with the intention that Kim and Paige would split time in the circle, often within the same game. The two have very different styles. Paige is right-handed and a control pitcher who mixes speeds very*

*well. Kim is a left-handed power pitcher. They complement one another very well. Kim then faced a variety of different injuries last spring and it really stunted her development. Paige was often great for the first two times through an opponent's lineup and then got roughed up a bit the third time through. Having both Kim and Paige available would allow us to mix-and-match a little bit, even within the same game. We'll have to see how it goes. Michelle Ridderhoff will also see some action in the circle. She is physically gifted and just needs more experience. She's going to be fun to watch as she develops."*

## **CATCHING**

With the departure of all-SCC selection Olivia Tilly, who graduated Wheaton Academy as one of the finest softball players in the history of the program, settling the catcher position will be critical for the Warriors in 2010. Three players – juniors Bekah Heubner and Jordyn Hoepner, along with freshman **Emily Anderson** – will be looked upon to solidify the position. Hoepner is the only one of the three that has seen action behind the plate in a varsity softball game. Heubner, who will be looked upon to play a number of positions, has a very strong arm and great toughness, while Anderson is inexperienced but has the tools necessary to develop into an excellent receiver.

**Starowitz on the Wheaton Academy catchers:** *"I'd be lying if I told you that catching isn't a point of concern heading into the 2010 season. Olivia Tilly was someone that in many ways we just left back there and she did everything for us. Not only was she a great offensive threat having hit seven home runs last year, she was a tremendous defensive catcher. She handled our pitchers very well. We have three players who have the necessary tools to be very good catchers. I also think they have the toughness and intelligence that's so critical to being a good catcher. None of the three has very much experience and that's a concern. Jordyn saw some time behind the plate last spring and showed flashes of being a solid defensive catcher. Emily is a freshman. It's tough to step in as a freshman and start behind the plate, but she may do just that. She's an explosive athlete who, in time, will be an all-SCC caliber catcher. How soon that will happen remains to be seen. Bekah is a super tough kid, explosive, and has a strong arm. She'll see some time back there as well. We may struggle early in the season back there but in time I think we'll be just fine."*

## **THE INFIELD**

The Wheaton Academy infield should be a position of strength in 2011. The return of juniors Caitlin Koehler and Kim Olson, both of whom have already seen extensive varsity action in their high school careers, should provide the Warriors with two components for a solid defensive infield. Gifted freshman Marissa Gagliano should also see extensive action and will likely be the starter at shortstop. Olson, when not pitching, will handle duties at first base while Koehler has manned second base for each of the last two seasons. Olson hit .338 with five doubles and two home runs as a sophomore Koehler recorded a .239 batting average but led the team in walks with 19 and was second on the team with a .419 on-base percentage. Junior Bekah Heubner, when not playing the outfield or catching, could see action at third base.

Junior **Emily Hillstrom** could also see some action at third base, while senior **Jenna Clancy** will compete for playing time at first base and third base. Sophomore **Kelsey Ridderhoff** could also see action on the infield for the Warriors. Junior **Kayla Costley**, when not playing outfield, could see action at first base where she played at the frosh/soph. level a year ago. Michelle Ridderhoff will also see action at first base and fellow freshmen **Gina Graff** and **Jenna Thiel** may see action at third and first base, respectively.

**Starowitz on the Wheaton Academy infield:** *“We have the opportunity to have a very good defensive infield. Kim Olson is an excellent defensive first baseman. She’s a big, athletic left-handed target with range. Caitlin Koehler is someone who came into the program as a freshman two years ago with little experience and has made herself one of the better defensive second basemen in the SCC. She has tremendous range and her throwing arm has strengthened over the last year. Bekah Heubner started to see some action at shortstop last spring and could see action at third base this season. She has a terrific throwing arm and is easily one of our best athletes. Freshman Marissa Gagliano will likely start at shortstop and she’s a very good defensive player who understands how to play the game. Marissa’s the type of defensive player who saves about 2-3 outs per game with her glove. Emily Hillstrom was a reserve on the frosh./soph. team last year who has worked tremendously hard this season and she has the opportunity to contribute. Jenna Clancy is a talented young lady who has had difficulty staying healthy. If she can stay in good physical shape, she’ll help us both offensively and defensively. Sophomore Kelsey*

*Ridderhoff, along with freshmen Gina Graff and Jenna Thiel, are talented kids who will have the opportunity to contribute. I'll be very disappointed if we don't have a very good defensive infield.*

## **THE OUTFIELD**

The Wheaton Academy outfield will not be as experienced as the infield but the ability of junior Bekah Heubner to play in the outfield could provide the Warriors with some flexibility. If she isn't catching, it is very likely that Heubner will anchor centerfield. Although she only started playing softball a week into her freshman campaign, Heubner earned all-SCC honors as a sophomore in 2010 as she hit .309 with 3 doubles, 2 triples and a home run. Jordyn Hoepner started in rightfield for a significant portion of 2010 and will have the opportunity to contribute in the outfield again this season.

Juniors **Anna Anderson**, Kayla Costley, and **Noelle Hirsch**, along with sophomores **Melissa Snyder** and Kelsey Ridderhoff, all played significantly at the frosh/soph. level a year ago and should compete to see action. Freshmen **Sarah McClain**, Gina Graff, and **Clarissa Young** are all talented athletes who will compete for playing time as well.

**Starowitz on the Wheaton Academy outfield:** *“Our defensive lineup will depend a lot on who catches for us and who settles in at third base. When Bekah Heubner is not catching I think she'll spend much of her time in centerfield. Bekah can really run, has an elite throwing arm, and has now played enough softball where she's starting to feel much more comfortable. Jordyn Hoepner was promoted from the frosh/soph. team prior to our spring break trip last year and did a really nice job in rightfield. She'll see time in the outfield when she's not catching. Anna Anderson, Kayla Costley, and Noelle Hirsch are three juniors who played on the frosh/soph. team last year and I expect all of them to compete for playing time. Noelle was one of the best hitters on the frosh/soph. team a year ago and Anna Anderson has the ability to be a very good slapper. Kayla is probably as good as we have at tracking fly balls. Melissa Snyder was promoted from the frosh/soph. to varsity toward the end of last year and has shown a lot of growth this spring. She'll help us. Sarah McClain, Gina Graff, and Clarissa Young are three*

*very promising freshmen who will also compete for playing time.*

## **THE OUTLOOK**

*Said Starowitz on the prospects of the 2011 campaign: "I really like this team. In our first two years we've really only been about 10 deep. We may not have as many top-line players this year but we are definitely deeper. I'll feel better when catcher sorts itself out and when our outfield has more experience. I think our pitching should be solid. Our freshman class, while not experienced, is extremely athletic. Yes, we have to replace six starters. That's never easy. However, we have two solid pitchers returning, we'll have a good defensive infield, and in time we'll be good at catcher. We'll need to find some different ways to score runs this year as we won't be able to rely on Olivia Tilly's home runs.*

*This is an extremely hard working group. They really care about one another. Two years ago I think girls were almost embarrassed to be Wheaton Academy softball players. Now I think there is much more pride in being a WA softball player because the girls have put in a lot of effort to improve. This season will present a lot of challenges but this program is getting closer to where we all want it to be. If they are patient with our early-season struggles our parents and fans are really going to watch this team grow. It will be a fun team to cheer for because you're going to get a tremendous effort from our girls. They'll glorify God with their play, they'll love one another, and they'll compete. Our goal is to be selfless and to get the very most out of our individual and collective abilities.*