

Big Boys on the Block

Contributed by Sean Duncan
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This is the first in a series of stories highlighting the Top 20 IL High School Teams.

Tough, talented and loaded with pitching,

No. 1 St. Rita is poised to win its second state title this year. Left to Right: Tony Zych, Matt Conrath, Sean Estand, Chris Chojnowski, Tommy Whelan. - photo by Mary Compton

No, left-handed pitcher Matt Conrath won't be racking up the sacks and tackles as he did on the football field. And Sean Estand won't be catching any touchdown passes at third base this spring. But don't think for a second that the same ingredients that led St. Rita's football team to Class 7A state title — talent, toughness and experience — won't translate on the baseball diamond.

That same mental toughness and championship experience are infused into the fabric of St. Rita's baseball team. Now mix in extraordinary pitching depth, six returning starters and three consecutive 30-plus-win seasons, and you have the reason why the Prep Baseball Report is predicting the Mustangs will be collecting another oversized trophy come June.

"Winning is contagious, winning is an attitude," said St. Rita coach Mike Zunica, who has eight football players on his roster, six of them starters.

Being in big games like that can only help you. The toughness is huge every year for us. This is a special group of seniors. There's a lot of character in this group. They have a lot of charisma.

Obviously, toughness alone doesn't win baseball games. Pitching does. And the Mustangs, who advanced to the Elite Eight of the summer state tournament for the second consecutive year, have a stable of impressive arms. Senior Chris Chojnowski, a 6-foot-5, 210-pound right-hander, has been the team's ace since his sophomore year, when the 34-5 Mustangs fell short of reaching their second straight Class AA state quarterfinal berth, losing in the superregionals.

Last season, the Mustangs went 30-9 but lost to Lyons Township in the sectional final. This year's edition, Chojnowski said, is a more complete team.

"Two years ago, with [PBR All-Stater] Ryne White, we were a power-hitting team but we didn't really have the pitching," said Chojnowski, who went 8-3 with a 1.92 ERA. "Last year we were more of a small-ball team and relied on our pitching.

"This year, we can do it all. I expect nothing less than a state championship. Anything else would be a disappointment."

Chojnowski won't have the burden of carrying the pitching load by himself. The emergence of junior right-hander Tony Zych gives Zunica another bona fide ace. The 6-2 Zych, who also plays second base, has one of the best arms in the state, regardless of class. "Tony is the real deal," Zunica said.

Conrath, at 6-7, 250 pounds, is a monster on the mound, where he went 8-3 with a 3.29 ERA as a junior. As a defensive end on the football team, the Virginia-bound Conrath collected 118 tackles and 16 sacks.

Senior right-hander Steve Heaney, senior left-handed pitcher/first baseman Luis Soto, junior right-hander Kenny Stoklosa and junior right-hander Jason Kafka are all strong options for Zunica as well.

And in the late innings of a tight game, Estand, who is arguably the best defensive third baseman in the state, moves to the mound, where he uses his 88-90 mph fastball to close it out. Signed at Eastern Illinois, Estand went 2-0 with five saves and a 1.20 ERA last season.

"I love closing," Estand said, "I love the pressure."

Offensively, Zunica said St. Francis-bound outfielder Tommy Whelan is the team's best hitter. Senior catcher Julio Godinez and first baseman Soto are also returning starters. Junior pitcher-outfielder Diego Martinez should also factor into the equation.

“Our strengths are our pitching and defense,” Estand said. “We have to come around with our hitting.”

The Mustangs will also count on a trio of extremely talented sophomores to contribute regularly: shortstop Justin Kopale, outfielder-first baseman Angelo Burrage and outfielder Dan Dispensa (younger brother of PBR all-state outfielder, Joe Dispensa).

“He hits just like his brother,” Zunica said.

Despite three sophomores in the lineup, the Mustangs are a senior-dominated group.

“This year’s football team was like no other,” Conrath said. “The [baseball] team is very similar. We’re a tight-knit group. We have everything here on this team to win another state title.”

this is part 1 in a series

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