

# Softball Hopes To Repeat Success From Historic 2007 Season

*Posted: Wednesday, March 5, 2008*

EAU CLAIRE, Wis. - A year after the UW-Eau Claire softball team finished a program-record third in the national tournament and defended the conference tourney crown in extra-inning fashion, the squad hopes to make similar headlines in the 2008 campaign.

Seventh-year head coach **Leslie Huntington** will have most of her infield back, but loses her outfield and a key pitcher. The only vacant spot on the infield is at middle infield, but all three outfielders are gone as is Mallory McKinney, who holds several Blugold pitching records.

Huntington has 15 veterans returning, including four seniors. The veterans saw a 38-14 season last year, which is the third-highest win total in Blugold history. Thrown into the 2008 mix are seven newcomers, six of them freshmen and the other being Blugold basketball guard **Heidi Arciszewski** (*So.-Thorp*).

The Blugolds' third place in the NCAA Division III Championship surpassed two fourth-place finishes as Eau Claire's best postseason run in history. After the Blugolds made it to the second round by handing Rhode Island College its worst loss of the season, they had to face Washington University of St. Louis. The Bears won 1-0 in walk-off fashion but Eau Claire followed up with games of 3-1 and 6-5 over Emory University (GA) and Plattsburg State (NY). In this double-elimination tournament, Eau Claire had to beat Linfield College (OR) for another shot at Washington University. However, the unprecedented season ended in a 22-10 loss. Linfield would go on to win the national championship.

Eau Claire got into its favorable position by hosting and winning both the Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (WIAC) Tourney and the NCAA Regional. In both tourneys, they beat UW-Oshkosh to advance. The second win made Eau Claire undefeated in the regional while the first clinched a spot in the NCAA tourney to begin with. A Rachel Paulus ninth-inning homer won it for the Blugolds in the deciding game, which returned the Titans' 2-1 defeat they handed Eau Claire earlier in the day.

Oshkosh was atop the regular season standings for the WIAC last year, but is not ranked in the preseason poll. The Blugolds are 10th and UW-Stevens Point is 17th.

The co-captain group of **Casey Leisgang** (*Sr.-Seymour*), **Jill Janke** (*Sr.-Black River Falls*), **Michelle Butkus** (*Sr.-Medford*) and **Tessa Pecha** (*Sr.-Eau Claire*) hope to lead Eau Claire back to the promised land. With All-WIAC First Team selection Leisgang returning, the offensive firepower is not in doubt. Huntington shares that sentiment, calling Leisgang an "impact player and a game-changer at the plate." The leadoff hitter set the school mark for homers in a career last year with 27 as she led the Blugolds in blasts with eight. She helped the Blugold bats break the program mark for homers in a season at 35, the third year in a row that record has been rewritten. Eight different Blugolds helped contribute to the round-tripper record. Leisgang also led Eau Claire in doubles (12), hits (61), total bases (97) and in runs scored (43). Her 41 RBIs were second on the team.

As a team, the Blugold offense outhit opponents .321-to-.256, outslugged them .451-to-.353, outscored them 455-to-348 and outhomered them 35-to-23. The team broke school records in RBIs with 260 and runs with 297.

First baseman Janke has the highest returning average at .374, though Lesigang (.370) and infielder Butkus (.333) bring high marks. Janke was a First Team All-WIAC member last year and Butkus was an honorable mention.

Cleanup hitter Butkus mostly patrolled the hot corner last year, but will see some time at middle infield this season as Huntington sorts out the pieces of the puzzle. The coach said Butkus was a "clutch hitter with good leadership." Leisgang played both second and short last year and will do the same again. First will most likely be occupied by Janke, who her coach calls "a very intelligent player who understands the game well and has good instincts." The No. 5 hitter slugged .574 and collected 58 hits in 2007.

Pecha, a former infielder, will lead a host of possible outfield options. At least five others are being considered

for the outfield. Huntington describes the candidates as "competitors that will complement the outfield" and as "players who can run down the ball with their speed."

The pitching corps is also a work in progress, but the No. 1 starter will be **Bri Sturm** (*Jr.-Zumbrota, MN/Zumbrota-Mazepa*). An All-WIAC First Teamer in 2007, Sturm went 15-4 in the circle while posting a 3.09 ERA. She struck out 62 while walking 45. She was the No. 2 pitcher last year behind McKinney as mainly those two outdid opponents in ERA (2.25-to-4.63), hits allowed (348-to-455), walks allowed (90-to-128) and strikeouts (252-to-228).

**Kristi Doucette** (*Jr.-Green Bay/Ashwaubenon*), who pitched 20.1 innings last year for Eau Claire, will also see some time on the mound. She went 3-0 with a 2.75 ERA a year ago. Huntington said to expect Doucette at the DP position as well. Another Blugold who saw minimal time pitching in 2007 will also be given an opportunity. **Jessica Flood** (*So.-Madison/La Follette*) threw just 4.0 innings a season ago, but Huntington said she has "good movement and her control continues to improve."

Freshman **Brooke Malnory** (*Fr.-Chippewa Falls/Chi-Hi*) is a "very mechanically sound pitcher with good movement and control," according to the coach. Another possibility is **Jenny Ross** (*Fr.-Mendota Heights, MN/Henry Sibley*), though she may just see the later innings as she recovers from an ACL surgery. Huntington described her as a potential "dominating closing pitcher." **Jackie Chlan** (*Fr.-Apple Valley, MN*), who Huntington describes as "a tenacious competitor," will also battle for a pitching spot.

The backstop for the Blugold pitchers will most likely be **Bekki Kidnie** (*So.-St. Paul, MN/Johnson*), last year's catcher. Huntington places a lot of faith in Kidnie, saying she "knows how to call her own game and does it well." Kidnie caught all but three games a year ago. **Jen Barron** (*Jr.-Brooklyn Center, MN*) is also expected to see some time behind the plate.

Huntington and her staff will get their first look at the 2008 squad in action this weekend at Rosemount, Minn. Eau Claire will play St. Mary's (MN), Gustavus Adolphus College (MN) and St. Thomas (MN). The Blugolds will then head to sunny Arizona over spring break for the Tuscon Invite Games. They will play 12 games in seven days. The only ranked team Eau Claire faces in the two events is St. Thomas, tied for the No. 4 ranking. The home and WIAC opener is on April 1 against UW-Stout.

This is Huntington's seventh season. In six years, she has climbed to sixth all-time among WIAC coaches in wins. The coaching staff returns **Robin Baker** and **Billie Buss**. Baker works with the pitchers and defense while Buss works with the outfielders. For student coaches, **Rachel Lemon** returns while **Stacey Epping** joins for her first year. Epping played last season for the Blugolds. The 2007 staff of Huntington, Baker, Buss, Nicole Pederson and Lemon were honored as the Great Lakes Region Coaching Staff of the Year for the second consecutive year.