

Season Preview: Softball Returns Solid Group in 2010

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EAU CLAIRE, Wis. (UWECBlugolds.com) - With a strong group of returners, the UW-Eau Claire softball team will look to improve over last season's record of 28-16.

The Bugolds made their fourth straight appearance in the NCAA Division III Regional last year, but went 1-2 to end their post-season run. The Bugolds won the 2008 National Championship and finished third in 2007. The 2010 season provides extra incentive to make a national title run as UW-Eau Claire and the City of Eau Claire will host the 2010 NCAA Division III Softball Championship, May 21-25 at Gelein Field in Carson Park.

Eau Claire welcomes back 12 letterwinners from last season, and every one of them played in 16 games or more in 2009. The Bugolds also have four returners who received All-Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference recognition last year, first teamers **Aleisha Harper** (So.-Mondovi, Wis./Eau Claire North) and **Katie Stalker** (Sr.-Madison, Wis./La Follette) and honorable mention selections **Bekki Kidnie** (Sr.-St. Paul, Minn./Johnson) and **Ainsley Klar** (Sr.-La Crosse, Wis./Aquinas). Harper, Kidnie and Stalker also received National Fastpitch Coaches Association (NFCA) second team All-Region honors while Harper was named to the All-Tournament team at the NCAA Regional.

In the infield, the Bugolds have several experienced players returning. Stalker, Harper, Klar, and **Jess Freagon** (So.-Chippewa Falls, Wis./McDonell) will all vie for significant playing time this season in the infield. Freagon started 21 times last year while the other three made no less than 32 starts. Stalker and Harper were also the Bugolds' top two hitters a season ago as they both had batting averages of above .400. Klar will get the early nod at first base and will be looked upon to step up offensively in her senior year. Stalker will look to lead the infield at second base while Harper, after playing 32 games at second base last year, will make the permanent switch to third base to provide more speed at the hot corner.

The early season starter at shortstop will be **Samantha Weix** (Fr.-Elk Mound, Wis.), a first-year player who has experienced significant improvement both offensively and defensively during the first few weeks of indoor workouts. Other players who will compete for infield roles include veteran **Kaity Acker** (Jr.-Cross Plains, Wis./Middleton), who started seven games last year while playing in 17, as well as newcomers, **Brittany Bergquist** (Fr.-Stevens Point, Wis./SPASH) and **Emily Haluska** (Fr.-Stevens Point, Wis./SPASH). Haluska joined the squad just a week ago after competing for the Bugold women's hockey team this season.

In the circle, three pitchers will vie for time. **Ashley Meinen** (So.-Chippewa Falls, Wis./McDonell), who made 27 appearances a season ago and started 10 times, is the lone returning pitcher. Meinen went 8-6 on the season while striking out 50 batters and held a 2.46 ERA. However, freshmen **Jess Hegseth** (Fr.-Zumbrota, Minn./Zumbrota-Mazeppa) and **Kassie Krummel** (Fr.-Walcott, Iowa/Durant) will look to make an impact early in the year.

The Bugolds should be in good hands behind the plate as Kidnie, a senior who has started in 128 games, and **Nikki Bromelkamp** (So.-Zumbrota, Minn./Zumbrota-Mazeppa), a sophomore who has started 10 times and played in 16 games, will both get significant time. When not catching, the tandem will provide solid options in the DP position. Freshman **Jenny Hess** (Fr.-Wisconsin Rapids, Wis./Lincoln) has improved a lot during early season workouts as well and may get a few innings behind the dish. Her speed, work ethic and heads-up base running have also earned her a role as a pinch runner heading into the season.

In the outfield, **Sara Baumgartner** (Jr.-Arcadia, Wis.) and **Tamara Zeman** (Sr.-Lodi, Wis.) are back and both saw 41 starts last year. Baumgartner primarily started in centerfield while Zeman was mostly in right field and both will be back in those positions providing a strong defensive presence, but Coach Huntington has challenged them to produce offensively this season to secure their spots. In left field, five different Bugolds saw starts last year so the Bugolds will look for more consistency in the spot this year. **Meghan O'Hearn** (Jr.-Woodbury, Minn.), **Emily Muller** (So.-Lancaster, Wis.), and **Ashley Kenworthy** (Fr.-Tomah, Wis.) will challenge for the final outfield spot. All three players provide speed and arm strength, and they all bring something different to the plate. Who starts in left field may be determined by the opponent the Bugolds face.

Allison Carpenter (*Fr.-Eagan, Minn.*) will sit out the 2010 season due to season-ending shoulder surgery.

The Blugolds also return a large part of their offense from a season ago. This year's returners accounted for 211 of the team's 266 runs last year, 299 of the 399 hits, 162 of the 233 RBIs and 10 of the team's 15 home runs.

Eau Claire opens the season Friday when it competes in the NFCA Leadoff Classic in Panama City Beach, Florida. The Blugolds will play six games on the trip, with three opponents already known as they begin in pool play, while the final three will be determined when the tournament switches to bracket play. Eau Claire will be at home for the first time on April 7 while opening conference play April 8. The Blugolds will play at least five opponents who were ranked in the preseason NFCA Top 25 poll.

Head Coach Leslie Huntington returns for her ninth year leading the team and holds a 233-112 career record, the fifth most wins by any coach in WIAC history, and the Blugolds' all-time winningest coach. Robin Baker is also back for her ninth year as an assistant. Rachael Click, a former softball All-American at Gustavus Adolphus College (Minn.), will also serve as an assistant while Stacey Epping starts her third season as a student assistant. Also joining the coaching staff will be manager Karen Hansen, a freshman from Amery, Wis. who was unable to try out for the team in the fall due to ACL surgery.