2011 UW-Eau Claire Softball Preview

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EAU CLAIRE, Wis. (UWECBlugolds.com) - This year's UW-Eau Claire softball team looks to get back on track. The Blugolds will open the season March 5 in Rosemount, Minn.

After a 2010 campaign that saw the team miss a winning season for the first time since 2003, the Blugolds look to improve from 21-21 overall. Playing a tough schedule a year ago, the Blugolds started the season 2-10 but finished strong, winning 19 of their next 30 games. The team also finished second in the conference during the regular season with an 11-5 record while claiming third in the Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (WIAC) tourney.

The team lost Katie Stalker, an All-WIAC first-team selection a year ago and a mainstay in many school offensive records, which includes her career mark for stolen bases. However, the team will return first-team infielder **Aleisha Harper** *(Jr.-Mondovi, Wis./Eau Claire North)* and honorable mention **Emily Muller** *(Jr.-Lancaster, Wis.)*, an infielder/outfielder. In addition, the Blugolds have seven individuals who started 16 games or more last season.

The veterans will mix with the new on the infield. The team returns plenty of experience at second base with regular starter Harper coming back and at third base with junior captain Muller.

Harper had the team's second-highest batting average at .302 last year and managed to get on base frequently. She was second in hits (38) and tied for second in walks (14). She also had 10 steals and 23 runs, both second for the Blugolds.

Muller was second in RBIs on the team with 21 -- often from the No. 3 spot -- while posting 22 runs. Muller was also tied for first in doubles (7) while second in total bases (45) and tied for second in walks (14). She also was productive with her outs via team-leading totals in sac bunts and sac flies.

Emily Haluska *(So.-Stevens Point, Wis./SPASH)*, who will also see time in the infield this season, shined at the hot corner as a freshman and moved runners over at the plate with nine sac bunts, second for Eau Claire.

The rest of the infield will try to make up for some graduated players in Bekki Kidnie, Ainsley Klar and Stalker.

At catcher, the team looks to make up for the loss of Kidnie with a few options. **Nikki Bromelkamp** *(Jr.-Zumbrota, Minn./Zumbrota-Mazeppa)* returns the only starts at the position with her four games behind the dish. **Jenny Hess** *(So.-Wisconsin Rapids, Wis./Lincoln)*, **Samantha Preston** *(Fr.-Altoona, Wis.)* and Muller are also listed as catcher.

The Blugolds will also be looking for a few individuals to step up at first base with **Jess Freagon** *(Jr.-Chippewa Falls, Wis./McDonell)* returning four starts and **Kaity Acker** *(Sr.-Cross Plains, Wis./Middleton)* bringing back two. Freagon led the team in slugging at .576 and clubbed four homers with seven doubles, both tied for first. Coach Leslie Huntington will also look at Bromelkamp.

Shortstop will also see some new faces. Freagon played three games there last season while **Samantha Weix** *(So.-Elk Mound, Wis.)* was in one. Joining them this season will be **Brittany Bergquist** *(So.-Stevens Point, Wis./SPASH)* and **Amanda Houle** *(Fr.-Chisago City, Minn./Chisago Lakes)*.

In the outfield, the team returns a solid group. Last year, **Sara Baumgartner** *(Sr.-Arcadia, Wis.)* manned center field for all but two starts while Muller started 38 games in left field. Baumgartner hit .295 for the Blugolds last year with 36 hits and 43 total bases, all third on the team. Muller has moved to the infield this season, although the move is not necessarily permanent.

Hess will start in right field initially while **Haley Williams** *(Fr.-Waunakee, Wis.)*, Houle, **Ashley Kenworthy** *(So.-Tomah, Wis.)* and Weix could all see time in the outfield, most likely in left field, as well.

Acker held the designated player slot a season ago and led the team in RBIs with 24. Her slugging percentage was .500 while her on-base percentage was .396. The four home runs she hit tied for first on the team.

In the circle, the Blugolds will look for some improvement to help keep them in games. Combined with the improvements the coaches have made to the offensive game, the team is optimistic about this season.

Eau Claire retains two starters in the circle. **Ashley Meinen** *(Jr.-Chippewa Falls, Wis./McDonell)*, who had 16 starts last season, led the Blugolds with a 2.99 ERA. She went 9-4 with 36 strikeouts and 27 walks during the season. **Jess Hegseth** *(So.-Zumbrota, Minn./Zumbrota-Mazeppa)* made 17 starts and saw 22 games with a 5.69 ERA. Batters managed 20 walks off her to go with 16 strikeouts.

Emma Wishau *(Fr.-Waterford, Wis./Waterford Union)* and **Lauren Carlson** *(Fr.-Eagan, Minn.)* will be regulars in the pitching rotation while **Emily Ruegemer** *(Fr.-St. Cloud, Minn./Cathedral)* could see time pitching as well.

The Blugolds open their season Saturday, March 5, at the Rosemount Dome in Rosemount, Minn. against St. Thomas at 4 p.m., and will then follow with a doubleheader against Buena Vista at 11 a.m. Sunday. On March 19, the team heads to Arizona to play in the Tucson Invitational Games, March 20-25. Eau Claire is scheduled to open its home schedule on April 3 against Luther College, a team that is ranked fifth in the NFCA preseason poll. The Norse ended their 2010 campaign in the NCAA National Championship tournament at Gelein Field. The Blugolds' first WIAC contest is April 7 at UW-Stout. The Blugolds are scheduled to play at least four opponents currently ranked in the NFCA Top 25.

The team will be led by Huntington in her 10th season as coach. The winningest coach in Eau Claire softball history, Huntington holds a 254-133 career record and is 11 wins from taking the No. 4 spot in WIAC history.