

Huntington Optimistic About Blugold Softball

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"Excited" and "optimistic" are the two words that fourth-year UW-Eau Claire head coach Leslie Huntington used to describe her anticipation for the 2005 softball season.

The reigning Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference Coach of the Year welcomes back 12 of 19 letterwinners from last year's regular season conference championship squad including WIAC Pitcher of the Year **Mallory McKinney**.

Huntington hedges on her optimism by pointing out that the Blugolds will be a relatively young squad with just one senior and six juniors. The remaining 11 players on the 18-player roster include six sophomores and five freshmen.

McKinney, an NFCA second team All-American last year as a freshman, is obviously a solid building block for the foundation of this year's squad. She fashioned a 14-7 record with a 1.15 ERA on the mound and had a walk to strikeout ratio of 13-91 in 128 1/3 innings of work. She also was the team's second-leading hitter with a .362 average but led in runs batted in with 30 and had a team-high seven home runs.

The Blugolds are coming off a 26-17 campaign in which they won the WIAC regular season championship with a 12-4 mark but lost in the conference tournament and thus had a successful season abruptly halted. This year's team goal, according to Huntington, is to "take the next step" and she indicated the players are "pretty driven because they were teased by success by not winning the conference tournament" last year.

The Blugolds landed three spots on last year's All-Conference team but McKinney will be the only returning one on the field. Emilee Planert, an All-Great Lakes Region second team shortstop, and Beth Steward, an All-WIAC catcher, will still have an influence on this year's team as they will serve as student coaches-Planert as soon as she completes her final season with the basketball team. Planert was the team MVP last year and Steward earned the team Most Inspirational award.

The lone senior on the squad is **Molly Blakewell**, an honorable mention All-WIAC pick as a first baseman. She may switch corners of the infield with a spot available at third but Huntington definitely wants her on the infield because of her leadership ability.

The success of this year's squad may depend upon the consistency of a second pitcher and filling Planert's spot at shortstop, says Huntington.

The Blugolds do have their entire pitching corps back. In addition to McKinney, **Andrea Neuville** worked 97 2/3 innings and owned a 7-8 record last year and **Molly Johnson** hurled 65 1/3 innings with a 5-2 record and 2.36 ERA. Huntington said that Neuville will likely be the No. 2 pitcher because of a good changeup and "devastating drop when she's on" but points out the need for consistency if the Blugolds are to succeed. Johnson can relieve either of the starters and offers a good change of pace in speed.

The Blugolds will have another pitching option available with the addition of freshman **Jill Janke**. A two-time Coulee Conference Player of the Year, Janke earned All-State honors as an infielder but is also a left-handed pitcher and rates as a solid all-around athlete. She is also a possibility at first base or as the designated player.

The heir apparent at the shortstop position seems to be freshman **Casey Leisgang** whom Huntington says has speed, power with the bat and the ability to make spectacular plays in the field look easy. She is being challenged by **Tessa Pecha** who has good skills with the bat and also is a very intelligent player, says Huntington.

Huntington is looking forward to the return of infielder **Laura Brackey**, who earned last year's team Golden Glove Award at second base. She is still competing with the Blugold hockey team until the winter season ends. In Brackey's absence, **Shannon Barone** has been filling that spot and also gives Huntington some options at third.

The three backstop candidates are **Megan Oster**,