

PREVIEW | Team shuffles around lineup. 17 of 31 players either freshmen or sophomores

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over at first base," Davis said. "We also made the move with Drew because he's our closer. Instead of having him play third base and having to make throws, he won't have to throw as much at first base."

Freshman Jordan Howe played the middle infield positions in high school but will move to third to replace Garwood. Sophomore Steven Rose will be the shortstop for the Bulldogs. He started 49 games last year and was fourth in batting average at .291.

Second base will also see changes. Junior Luke Crader started 67 games the last two years at second base. However, junior transfer Mike Reese will take over this year.

"We have two really great hit-

ters at second base," Davis said. "Crader will probably end up being the DH and leading off. Reese, is a really fast kid. He adds really good defense and some power, which is rare for a second baseman."

The Bulldog outfield features four players who could see playing time. Jones, along with juniors Kenny Swanson, Kody Stricklin and freshman Brett Budd all will log innings. Davis said Stricklin is the biggest surprise of the three, and that he has worked extremely hard, and deserves a spot in the lineup.

"Our lineup should be pretty good," Reese said. "We have several good hitters, but we don't have much power. We're more gap-to-gap hitters. We have really good team speed as well."

"We have several good hitters, but we don't have much power. We're more gap-to-gap hitters."

Mike Reese
Junior



Senior right-handed pitcher Jake Smith expects to contribute out of the bullpen this season. The Bulldogs' 8.61 ERA was last in the MIAA last season.

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BASEBALL | Bulldogs must face tough MIAA

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Jones returns as the team's leading offensive threat. He hit .316, had a .402 slugging percentage and committed just two errors. He has 157 hits through three seasons and likely will break Patrick Hardin's Truman career record of 191.

The MIAA is loaded. Emporia State University, which lost in the national championship last season, is ranked preseason No. 1 by the Collegiate Baseball Newspaper. The University of Central Missouri and the University of Nebraska-Omaha made the NCAA Tournament last season.

The Bulldogs are at a major scholarship disadvantage compared to other MIAA schools, making the playing field uneven for Truman.

Head coach Dan Davis enters his fourth season as Bulldog head coach. Last season the Bulldogs set school records for hits, doubles, total bases, fielding percentage and strikeouts. It would be unrealistic to think the Bulldogs will compete for a spot in the upper echelon of the conference. However, the team has the chance to prove the naysayers wrong. The roster is young, with 17 of the 31 players either freshmen or sophomores. This means the team should improve as the season goes on. Sophomores Devon Myers, Pete Jurich, Tyler Stefan, Ryan Trimble and Steven Rose saw significant playing time last season. They should all be improved.

Even with improvement from last year, Truman still has problems. The Bulldogs hit .262 as a team last season, almost 100 points less than their opponents. The 'Dogs ranked 200 or worse in Div. II in six different categories.

The 'Dogs' MIAA win total has increased slightly each of the last four seasons and with the experience from the young players, the Bulldogs should see an improvement in win total again. Fifteen to 20 wins would be a big step for the program that has never won more than 21 games.

But even if Truman doesn't win 15-20 games, the mere fact baseball is being played means summer is right around the corner.

SOFTBALL | Team works on hitting during the offseason to improve on last season's .232 batting average

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not starting from scratch. The nine returners are led by seniors Richelle van Gennip and Erica LaCombe. Van Gennip anchors a rapidly growing pitching staff while LaCombe is now a fixture in the outfield instead of behind the plate. Brown said their leadership has been essential to the team's unity.

"I feel like the chemistry and the dynamic is pretty good right now on our team and a lot of that is credited to the upperclassmen welcoming [the underclassmen] and creating a team spirit right away," Brown said.

Van Gennip transferred to Truman from Crowder College (Kan.) before the 2009 season and made her presence felt immediately. In 2009, she led the team in starts, ERA and strikeouts. She joins freshman Kirsten Krause and juniors transfer Beth Schnurbusch and Ashley Rotkovich on the pitching staff, her experience will prove vital.

The new faces, however, are not the only changes for the team. Van Gennip said that practices are being better utilized this



Senior outfielder Erica LaCombe is arguably the top returning hitter for the Bulldogs.

Brian O'Shaughnessy/Index

year, despite being inside thus far.

"Our practices are usually three to four hours now instead of an hour and half or two hours last year," van Gennip said. "So we cover a lot more things and we spend a lot of time on hitting."

Last year's team finished with a .232 batting average, but the length

of time spent on hitting in practice is not the only way the 'Dogs are trying to improve. Brown said she helped out at the University of Missouri each of the last two summers and has decided to put the Tigers' approach into practice.

Since the fall, Brown said the team has worked on dividing the plate from middle-in or middle-out

to cut down their hitting zone on each pitch. At this point, there have been mixed reactions and results, but Brown said she thinks that the new approach will work.

"I think that some girls have really, really embraced it and are doing really well with it, and then I think some are sort of struggling with it because you have to

be very disciplined," Brown said. "The more elite the pitcher you're going to see, the more beneficial it's going to be."

LaCombe, the team's top returning hitter, said she believes that between this new approach and the new talent that was brought in since last season, hitting will be a strong point for the Bulldogs.

"I think we're going to hit the crap out of the ball," LaCombe said. "We have speed, a good mix of power and slapping and everything and I just really think that offensively, we're going to bring it."

Despite the many changes from last season, Truman will have to earn its opponents' respect. The Bulldogs were picked last in the MIAA preseason coaches' poll. LaCombe said she thinks the team would surprise a lot of people.

"I really expect us to do damage in the conference and be one of the top teams in the conference," LaCombe said. "We really expect like we should have a really good season, that we should have a winning season and significantly improve from last year."

BROWN | Coach must improve on 3-17 mark in conference play from last season, the softball team's worst record since 1996

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with an 11-34 record and 3-17 mark in conference play. Both the overall and conference win totals were the lowest for Truman since 1996.

That would seemingly put some pressure on Brown as she enters her fourth season at the helm. How long is the grace period for a coach that inherited a previously successful program?

Apparently, it will be longer than four years. Wollmering said Monday that this softball season, which starts Feb. 19, will not be a make-or-break year for Brown.

"There is no do-or-die situation this year," Wollmering said.

And honestly, it probably shouldn't be. This isn't University of Kentucky basketball or University of Florida football, where coaches face a win-now-or-get-out atmosphere. To say Truman softball should have that mentality would grossly misrepresent the mission of Bulldog athletics.

Wollmering said the No. 1

priority for coaches at Truman is to make sure their athletes do well academically and graduate. The softball team has an average cumulative GPA of 3.42, which is equal to the average cumulative GPA for all female Truman athletes. So Brown is fulfilling Wollmering's top priority.

Still, if a coach's only duty was to have athletes who perform well academically, then Truman could eliminate all of its athletic scholarships and suit up any of the other intelligent students on campus to take the diamond.

"Our No. 1 priority for student athletes is we want them to leave here with a degree, but it doesn't mean that we don't want them to come here and have a good experience in athletics and help us be successful," Wollmering said.

Wollmering showed just two years ago that win-loss records matter at Truman when he canned women's basketball head coach John Sloop. Sloop's athletes always performed well in the classroom.

They just didn't win many games. He had an eight-year winning percentage of 39.9 percent, including a 23.8 mark in conference play.

Brown's winning percentage at Truman (37.3 percent overall and 31.6 percent in the MIAA) is fairly similar to Sloop's. So at some point, Brown will have to start winning games to keep her job.

And winning games starts with recruiting. Wollmering probably put it best Monday when he said of recruiting, "You can be the best jockey in the world, but if you're riding a donkey, you aren't going to win many races."

Now, I certainly don't think Wollmering was calling Brown's recruits donkeys. He simply was using a metaphor — that coaching starts with bringing in good players. And the fact of the matter is that during Brown's first three seasons, her four top players — alumni Christen Belcher, Katie Noski and Dani Meyer and senior Erica LaCombe — were recruited by previous coaching regimes.

That might be changing. Brown has eight freshmen on this year's roster, her largest recruiting class thus far. It's too soon to say whether the freshmen will be thoroughbreds or donkeys, but having plenty of horses in the stable is definitely a step in the right direction.

"I think this is probably our strongest recruiting class that we've brought in," Brown said. "They're a really talented class, and they are a good group of girls. And something that we've sort of been dealing with during the transition is team cohesion or chemistry, and we feel like that's a lot better too when we recruited those kids."

Any pressure on Brown might be heightened by coaching a women's sport, which traditionally yield better results at Truman than their male counterparts. For example, baseball head coach Dan Davis (18.3 winning percentage at Truman, 16.7 in MIAA) has had less success than Brown during his first three years coaching the Bulldogs, but then again, the baseball pro-

gram hasn't had a winning season since 1982.

Also, Wollmering said softball gets about \$70,000 in athletic scholarship money, more than twice as much as baseball.

It is fairly traditional for women's teams to receive more scholarship money than the male teams, as football sucks up a good portion of the male athletic scholarship money.

Although softball receives less athletic scholarship money than other MIAA schools, Wollmering said it still gets enough money to be competitive.

"In total, our program is probably getting similar funding to the other schools in the conference because maybe [other schools] are not giving as much academic aid," Wollmering said.

Eventually, Brown will need to make some strides with the softball program. Wollmering seems willing to give her some more time to prove herself. The question is, how much time?



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