

Bulldogs make strides

Since last season, the women's softball team has seen major progression in all facets of its game

STORY BY SAM SHERMAN, Sports Editor and PHOTOS BY ANNA GRACE, Photo Editor

At the beginning of this season, the Truman State softball team received disheartening but expected news from other MIAA coaches. After the MIAA Coaches' Poll was released, it was announced that the Bulldogs were projected to finish 12th in the conference following their 23-28 finish last season.

So far this season, the Bulldogs have far exceeded those expectations set by the MIAA head coaches.

Despite the lack of faith, junior outfielder and captain Kelsey Bollman said the Bulldogs traveled to their first tournament — the Alabama-Huntsville tournament — with high expectations, setting a goal of finishing 4-2 for the weekend. Although it wasn't until the 'Dogs played and won their first four games with a total point differential of 33-13 when Bollman said the team threw that goal out the window as they approached the game against the No. 15 University of Indianapolis Greyhounds.

"I remember going into day three at Alabama when we were 4-0, we had been doing so well," Bollman said. "I remember warming up for our first game, turning to one of the girls on the team and just saying 'I think we can do this, I think we can go 6-0.' Even though we all knew that [Indianapolis] was going to be a really tough game."

Bollman said the game against the Greyhounds was the turning point for head coach Erin Brown and the 'Dogs, a team that had underachieved last season after being projected to finish seventh in the conference, and as the final pitch was thrown and the Bulldogs completed their 2-1 victory against the now No. 2 Greyhounds, Bollman said the team's lack of confidence stemming from last season was replaced instead with a realization.

"Once we got out there and got to the third or fourth inning and it was 0-0 still, we were all just like 'We can do this, we can compete against anyone we play against,'" Bollman said. "To get that win, it was surreal and then it wasn't anymore because we knew that we actually had that ability the entire time, we just needed that kind of win to give us the confidence boost."

Since the win against Indianapolis, the Bulldogs have risen to third in the conference and earned a 16-6 record along the way. Senior first baseman Kristen Grossman said the success is owed to the team's balance of talent in the field, on the mound and in the batter's box. Bollman agreed and said the Bulldogs have seen impactful play this season from every class, not just the upperclassmen.

"It's all the way up and down the lineup, it's not just the seniors

doing really well or the juniors doing really well," Bollman said. "If you look at our stats, we have people from every single age bracket contributing to our success."

Grossman said this balance started long before the signature win against Indianapolis or before the season even started.

"It started in the fall, our very first practice," Grossman said. "We all got out there, we were so excited to play and we just clicked. There's something about this team, we're making postseason tangible and it's a good feeling especially being in this program four years. ... Our whole dynamic started that first practice and it hasn't changed."

Grossman said the 'Dogs playoff hopes remain alive largely because of the team's offensive production, as the Bulldogs have averaged 6.4 runs a game, out-scoring their opponents this season 141-89, compared to 4.6 runs a game at the end of last season. The team is less than 100 runs away from surpassing its run total from last year — in less than half the games the team played all last season.

Grossman said it's this run production that is keeping the team's pitching rotation and defensive lineup comfortable and happy as the Bulldogs keep rolling at the plate.

"Hitting-wise, we're all just seeing the ball and we're seeing it big," Grossman said. "That run support is really cushioning our pitchers so I know they love it when we're hitting well."

Consistency is the name of the game for the 'Dogs at the plate, as they've only had five games during which they've scored three runs or less.

The team's sudden jump in offensive play level, Bollman said, has other teams reeling for answers as to why the bottom-of-the-conference Bulldogs from last season are suddenly at the top and looking down at their competition.

"When we go into games, [other teams] are kind of expecting how we came out last year, what we did last year," Bollman said. "We've never really been on top of the conference for the last couple of years and so they'll see our stats per game, and they're like 'Why is this team hitting so well? How are they doing that?'"

At the plate isn't the only place the 'Dogs have made strides. On the mound, Bulldog pitchers have averaged under three earned runs per game this season compared to last season, during which they averaged 3.4 earned runs per game.

The recent history of the softball team dictates that a winning record would be a big accomplishment for a program that hasn't seen consistent success for years. The last year the Bulldogs finished above .500 for the season was 2008 when they finished 22-21



Anna Grace/Index
Junior outfielder and team captain Kelsey Bollman prepares to swing at a pitch Saturday against the Pittsburg State University Gorillas. Bollman has batted .391 this season.

and 8-10 in the conference.

Grossman said the team's success this season could continue to the end because of the team's overall approach to practice and games this season compared to last, as well as the level of talent up and down the batting lineup.

"The sky's the limit for us, as

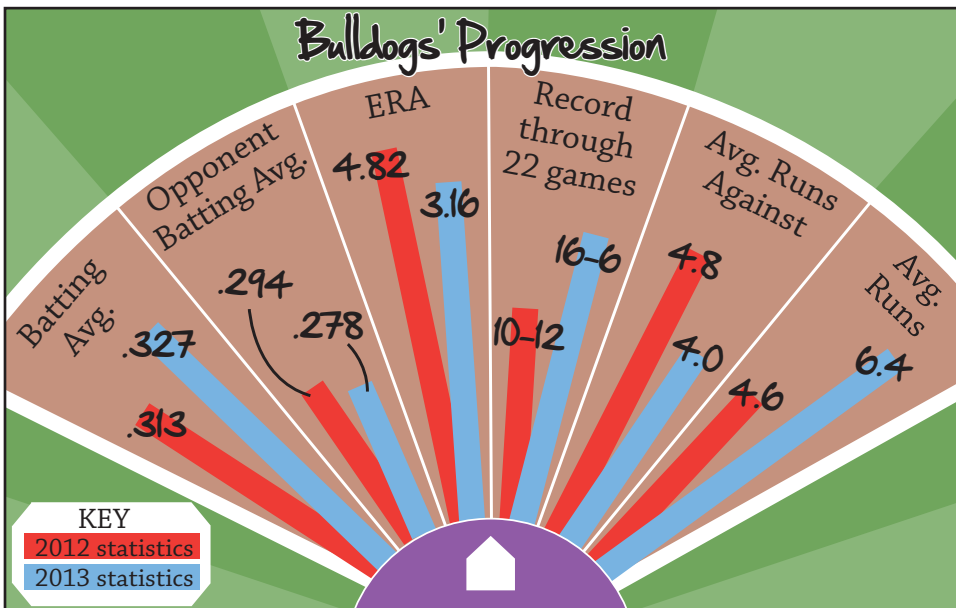
far as we really want to push it,"

Grossman said. "We've proven that we compete with nationally-ranked teams, but we also have proven that we need to work hard and beat those little teams and do the job there too."

Bollman agreed and said the consistency doesn't have to end at the end of the season. She said

it's sustainable for years to come because of the bar that has been set for younger players by the veterans.

"Everybody wants to play, everybody wants to be on the field, everybody is competing for positions," Bollman said. "So it's not anything that's going to be ending after this season."



Anna Grace/Index
Sophomore third baseman Cate Simon, above, prepares for a play on defense against the Pittsburg State University Gorillas, while senior first baseman Kristen Grossman, right, connects on a pitch at the plate Saturday against the Gorillas.