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By Andrew Cato, ShowMe Times Sports Editor

The pop of a baseball as it strikes a glove is a welcome sound to many early in the Spring, and gloves have been popping as the Dexter Bearcats are busy preparing for the 2012 season.

The 'Cats had a solid season in 2011, finishing at a .500 clip despite battling injury throughout the year. A walk-off, 12 inning win over Scott City in the District Semifinals put the 'Cats in the District Championship game against Kennett; the Tribe would down the 'Cats 8-0 and move on to the Final Four in the State Tournament.

"We've never gotten to go outside as much as we have this spring. That puts us ahead of where we usually are, but at the same time everyone else is getting to go outside too. We've made the most of our time outdoors, but we've had a big rain set in, so it will be a while before we can get back out on the field," head coach Brian Becker said. "Hopefully, by the time next Friday gets here it'll dry out and we'll be able to get back on it one or two more times before then."

The Bearcats faced a brutal road schedule last season, but will reap the benefit of playing 13 of their 18 regular-season games at home during the 2012 campaign.

"We were road warriors last year, and this year we get to stay home quite a bit more,"

Becker commented. "We finished .500 last year, and hopefully being the home team will lead to more victories. That final at-bat can have a big say in the outcome of the game a lot of times."

The 'Cats lost just two players to graduation last season - third baseman Bryn Hester, who is currently playing at Harding University, and center-fielder Josh Sifford. Coach Becker is excited about his team's chances, as the Bearcats return all other major contributors from last season.

"Loosing 'Siff' and Bryn, they were two good ball players, but we have a lot of experience coming back. A bunch of different kids got a lot of playing time. D.J. Dowdy started behind the plate for half the season; he did a great job for me, and he's only getting better. Cody Neldon saw a lot of action late in the year, and he's going to see the field every time we go out there. He hit over .440 in 20-something at-bats." Becker said. "We only have about 10 kids that we rotate on the varsity level, so all of my kids coming back are going to see a lot of time. Hopefully that will spell good things for us."

The 'Cats will regain the services of Josh Overall, who went down early last season after bizarre circumstances led to a season-ending shoulder surgery; the senior looks to fill in Hester's vacant third base spot and add another arm to what is shaping up to be an outstanding pitching staff.

"We lost [Overall] last year after he had shoulder surgery. He was on the mound last year in the Notre Dame game; during the first inning his dad came over and told me that I'd better enjoy him while I had him," Becker said. "He went out and pitched a great game and hit a home run, and then he was done for the year. He'll fill in some at third base, and he'll be back on the mound."

Starters Jordan Miller and Brad Potts will return to lead the rotation, as well as seniors Alex Cliff and Owen Flowers. Logan 'Perry' Northern, who saw extensive time as a reliever last season, will also return for the 'Cats.

"Jordan Miller saw a lot of time on the mound last year, and he'll slide in some at third base as well. Alex Cliff will be back - he didn't pitch any last year because of back problems. He's such a violent football player, and he stayed injured a lot. He made it through football season this year and stayed healthy, and he's going to try it on the mound again this year," Becker noted. "[Brad] Potts did an outstanding job on the mound last year; he drew a lot of the tougher teams, but finished with a .500 record and a 2.4 ERA."

He did an outstanding job for us, and I look for much of the same this year. Logan Northern and Owen Flowers both did a great job for us last year. 'Perry' does a good job; he comes out, throws strikes, and uses his breaking ball effectively."

A big question mark heading into the season was the health of shortstop Chase Young. Young, a three-sport athlete, sat out the latter part of the basketball season due to a nagging knee injury, but Becker indicated the junior would be good-to-go for the season opener.

"Chase is fine. His knee was bothering him the latter part of basketball season, so he had to sit out," he said. "He's swinging the bat well, and he's showing good range out at shortstop. He doesn't seem to have any ill effects from the problems he was having during basketball. It's a different sport - you get out there on the hardwood, and that can [irritate] injuries a lot more than going out there on the dirt can."

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The 'Cats look to have another great year on offense as well -

Young, Cliff, and Miller all earned All-District honors, while Potts was named to the All-Conference team in 2011. Potts was the hero of the District Semifinal game against Scott City; his shot into left-center drove in the winning run in the 12 inning contest.

"It's a pretty good group to return, especially with only one of them being seniors," Becker said of the group. "We're looking for some good things from our returning players, and our big thing right now is to stay healthy. We aren't that deep, because we have some kids that just aren't ready for the 'big time' yet. It's like any program - you want your kids to grow up a little before you throw them into the fire."

The Bearcats are set to open the season on Friday (March 16) afternoon, when they host the Doniphan Dons. Becker noted the premium of multi-run innings (due to new bat regulations) would make pitching and defense be more important than ever.

"I'm going to use a lot of pitchers, and we'll hopefully go out there and throw strikes and swing the bats well," he said. "The key is to throw strikes and play good defense, and it's going to be paramount this year. A one run lead this year is almost equivalent to a two or three run lead in years past. We'll have to be smart on the base-paths and not give up easy outs."

First pitch is scheduled for 4:15 p.m. on Friday, weather permitting.

For the full season schedule, click here.

Photos Above:

Top: Jordan Miller (left) delivers a pitch to Cody Neldon (right) during a bunting drill during Monday afternoon's practice.

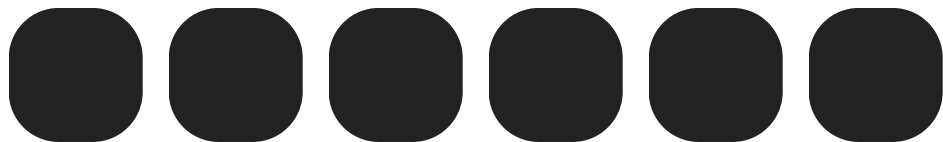
Middle: Senior Josh Overall works with a wood bat during Monday's practice.

Bottom: Assistant Coach Aaron Pixley instructs junior Brad Potts on proper bunting technique during Monday's practice.

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