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Morse, Lady 'Cats Prepare For 2012 Season

MARCH 17TH 2012 BY UNKNOWN

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By Andrew Cato, ShowMe Times Sports Editor

Fans of Lady Bearcat Softball will be greeted by fresh faces in the dugout this year, but not only the players; the Lady 'Cats will be sporting a new coaching staff in the 2012 season.

Leonard Morse is entering his first season as head coach of the Lady Bearcats; he assisted under previous head coach Tammy Crowley for the last four seasons, and has taught at Dexter for five years.

Chris Bolin, in his first year back in Dexter, will fill in as assistant coach.

"I started off assisting with the field work, and I could keep a scorebook; that really sealed the deal," Morse said, laughing. "I moved from groundskeeper to coach."

The Lady Bearcats only participate in the spring softball season; Morse noted this as one of his biggest challenges as a coach, as the MSHSAA State Tournament is only available during the fall season.

"Coach Bolin and I are trying to build this program back up and get more interest. We're both going to coach the summer leagues and the travel team, and most of our girls wind up playing on that team," he said. "That is the biggest challenge: to get good talent year-

in, year out when you don't have a State Title to play for. You don't have a District Tournament either, so sometimes it's hard to get girls motivated. We still have the county tournament, but that's down two teams this year since Bell City and Richland couldn't get teams together. We also lost those two games on the regular season, and those would have been easy wins for us."

The two big losses from last season's

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roster are Alec Jackson and Mollie Whitehead. Jackson, who was the team's ace pitcher, and played catcher on her off days, was lost to graduation and is currently playing softball at Shawnee Community College; Whitehead, currently a sophomore, elected to be a member of the track team this spring.

"Mollie Whitehead flipped over to track to throw the discus, and I can't blame her; I would have too if I'd had that talent. She's got a good shot at getting a college scholarship that way," Morse said. "She set all the school records when she was in middle school, but decided to try softball last year. She was a good first basemen last year for us, and we wish her the best."

"It's going to be hard, replacing Alec. Not only for what she could do at the plate, behind the plate, or on the mound as a pitcher, but also losing her leadership. All four years I was an assistant, she was on the team," he continued. "It's what we're looking for, who is going to step up and take the mantle and prove they can be the leader of the team. It's one thing to say you're a leader, but it's another to earn the teams respect and be a leader. I think we'll be okay replacing her behind the plate - Tiffany Watson played a little bit at catcher last year, but she also plays third and short for us."

Morse will look to several young players to fill in the roster this season; the softball Lady 'Cats have eight of 14 roster slots filled with sophomores.

"We're really young; I've only got one returning senior in Whitney Leyton, plus two more that came out this year, and one junior. I've got two freshmen, and the rest are sophomores," Morse said. "We had a handful not come out this year - we lost three seniors last year, two juniors didn't come back out, and a few sophomores didn't come out."

"Our defense will be top-notch. We've got two returning starters in the outfield, and two more in the infield. Riley Rickman is coming back, and she played some first base last year, so in a way, she's a returning starter as well," he continued. "Emily Triplett was our

DH last year, and she's playing third base for us now. We have some pieces that are filling in really well; one of the girls that moved in, Vicki Anderson, she's a pitcher and moved in from Imperial. She's a good pitcher, and she's not afraid to get in there and pitch inside. In left field, we'll have Whitney [Leyton] starting, and she provides a lot of leadership as well. The way she plays the game is full-out; she tends to get hurt because she's so aggressive, and she's not afraid to dive for a ball in the outfield. I can put her anywhere I want her to and she'll give me everything she has. Ashley Brown was our starting center fielder last year, and she's back; she has speed and a good arm, and she's not afraid to go after balls either."

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Morse was quick to point out his team's flexibility, which will be a key asset with such a short bench. He noted sophomore Kendra Stevenson, who can play virtually anywhere on the field. Most of her freshman season was spent on the corners or on the mound, but she has the ability to play some in the outfield as well.

Both Morse and Bolin expressed the same goal for their first season coaching the Lady Bearcats: more structure, excellent defense.

"We're trying to maintain a little more structure than there was in the past; I think we're going to have one of the best defensive infields that we've had in the five years I've been associated with this," Morse said. "In spring softball, if you have a good pitcher and good defense, you'll win some games, and we fully expect to win quite a few games. It's shaping up to be a good year; we have a good vibe around this team, and it's a lot of fun right now. We've been having trouble getting everyone out here at once, because of early season injuries or other school functions, but when we have them here, we've got a good group. They work hard, and they will do anything we ask them to without complaining, which is always a good quality. We're already improving, and jumping way out ahead of where we were because they're putting in the time."

"We have a tough schedule, as we still have to play New Madrid and Kennett," he added. "The Malden Tournament is being held in Bernie this year, and some of the Arkansas teams that come up for that are really good. It's not going to be a cakewalk, but we'll be competitive no matter what."

The Lady Bearcats are set to open the season on Monday, March 26, when they host Clearwater. First pitch is scheduled for 4:00 p.m.

Click here to download the 2012 Softball schedule.

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