

Bethel Softball

Pilots look to continue building a national power

*Editorial provided by Jeff Welsh - Bethel College Sports Information;
Photos Courtesy of Keith Cooper*



With the loss of six starters and eight contributors from the 2010 squad which made its fourth consecutive trip to the NAIA National Championship, many expect for the latest version of the Bethel College Pilots softball team to be in a rebuilding mode. Despite the mass exodus, however, Bethel Head Softball Coach Anna Welsh expects this team to be right up there with the best in the country. "We've got a lot of talent on this team," said Welsh. "But you don't win games with talent alone. This team, as talented as they are, needs to prove it on the field." Proving it on the field is something the Pilots have done over Welsh's first six years at the helm of the program.

Welsh took over the Bethel softball program in the summer of 2004 after a two year stint at NCAA DIII Saint Mary's College. The 24 year old coach inherited a program that was far from the bottom of the barrel. In fact, the Pilots were coming off three consecutive Mid-Central College Conference Championships. Despite winning the conference on a regular basis, the Pilots had never made an appearance in the NAIA National Championship.

"I knew Bethel had a quality softball program and I loved that it was a Christian school," said Welsh. "My goals were to take it to the next level and make the Pilots an NAIA power all while glorifying God through softball."

As often happens with a coaching change, the roster was in flux that first year. With new leadership came new standards and new expectations. Some players that starred under the previous coaching staff decided that the coaching change was a good time to look for other opportunities. After adding two soccer players to the roster to compete



Head Coach Anna Welsh



Bethel Seniors

with eleven, the Pilots battled their way to a third place finish in the MCC.

The following year, with a handful of Welsh's recruits on board, the Pilots once again found themselves atop the MCC. The Pilots were still a work in progress, however, as they just didn't have the depth to compete on a national level quite yet. Another disappointing post season loss meant the Bethel softball program still had a ways to go to get where Coach Welsh envisioned the program.

"We were better that second year, but I was still frustrated because I didn't always see that burning desire to be a national power," said Welsh.

Despite the frustration of another early end to the season, Welsh had quietly put together a recruiting class that would take Bethel to places they had never gone.

The 2007 Pilots had high expectations despite a lineup which featured five freshmen and one sophomore transfer in

the starting lineup. That sophomore transfer happened to be eventual three time NAIA All-American pitcher Brittney Hire. Hire, along with senior NAIA All-American pitcher Somer Stilley, would provide stability in the circle as this young team found its way through the season. The 2007 Pilots would go on to a record setting 45-10 season and the program's first ever appearance in the NAIA National Championship. It wasn't the records or the accomplishments that set that team apart, however, the 2007 team created a national identity for Bethel Softball. The 2007 team raised the bar on expectations for all teams to follow. That season gave everyone hope that a team from Northern Indiana in the Mid-Central College Conference could compete with the nation's elite just like Coach Welsh had envisioned.

The ability to become a national power was always Welsh's desire. It's a desire that many have but few have been able to accomplish given the long cold winters of Northern Indiana and financial disadvantages of the MCC.

Indiana has always been known as a basketball state. Most young boys and girls in the state grow up watching movies like Hoosiers and dream of one day making their name on the college hardwood. Therefore, the MCC with eight schools in Indiana has always been recognized as a basketball power conference. The recognition is well deserved as the Pilots have brought home three NAIA National Championships in men's basketball, MCC rival Indiana Wesleyan University has a women's NAIA National Championship, Grace College has a men's National Championship to its credit, and the University of Saint Francis just brought home the 2009-10 men's basketball National Championship. Softball and the MCC, on the other hand, has never been a recognized player on the national scene. In fact, before the 2007 Pilots made it to the NAIA National Championship, the MCC was only represented three times since the tournament began in 1981.

Cold weather plays a big part in northern school's lack of success on the national scene, but it's not the only reason. The NAIA limits softball programs to a maximum of ten full scholarships. The MCC has further limited its schools to 55% of the NAIA maximum and the Pilots have been limited to even less than that. Lower scholarship opportunities combined with the fact that most seasons the Pilots' first time on an actual softball field takes place during their first game could give any program an inferiority complex. Coach Welsh, however, has always been determined to not allow excuses in her program.

"We use it as motivation," said Welsh. "There is something very fulfilling about beating a team that you know has so much more money than you. While of course I'd love to have more scholarship money, we're not going to use it as an excuse. We are going to do more with less and be proud of it."

Doing more with less has become a theme for the Pilots' coaching staff. After the record setting 2007 season came the record setting



Emily Lamkin

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2008 season followed by the record setting 2009 season and finally the record setting 2010 season. To date the Pilots have made four consecutive trips to the NAIA National Championship. In 2010 Bethel was ranked as high as No. 3 in the country and they finished first in their pool to advance to the final eight for the first time in the program's history. Still, Coach Welsh is not satisfied.

"We did a lot of great things over the last four years with a lot of great people," said Welsh. "But now it's time to build upon our previous goals and take this program further."

Now that the Pilots have become a national power, they have one goal left and that is to become the first team sport other than basketball in MCC history to win an NAIA National Championship. Before they are able to win the championship, Welsh knows that Bethel needs to prove they can sustain their dominance over the long haul.

After losing eight players from last season, a group that went 196-32-1 in four years, the coaching staff knows that remaining a national power is not going to be easy. The 2011 Pilots will have eight new faces on the team and return only five players that saw significant playing time in the past.

Among the newcomers is Giana Zimmerman, a transfer from NCAA DI Southeast Missouri State University where she went 19-9 as the freshmen ace of the Redhawks. Much like the young 2007 team, the Pilots' pitching staff will again be a strength which will give the offense time to adjust to the college game. Zimmerman will combine with returning NAIA All-American Katie Boocher as well as juniors Kendra Zache and Ashley Wagner to form a talented pitching staff.

On the offensive side of the ball, the Pilots have been blessed with powerful bats during their four year NAIA run. In fact, Bethel graduated three players that finished their careers in the top ten all time in the school career home run list. 2010 NAIA Catcher of the Year Brittney Fisher (33), Mandy Cripe (30), and Sarah Rassi (28) finished their careers third through fifth on the all-time home runs list and will be missing from the middle of the Pilots' lineup during the 2011 season.

Despite the loss of several power hitters, the Pilots expect to see plenty of the long ball in 2011. Boocher, who is expected to make a huge impact in the circle this season, is also expected to continue her dominance at the plate which led to some impressive numbers last year. Boocher had a record setting season in 2010 with a .524 batting average, 19 home runs, and 70 runs batted in. All three numbers set or tied

Bethel single season records.

Senior Kaitlyn Dubois will also continue to add punch to the lineup. The three year starter at second base has 19 career home runs and will look to build upon her already stellar career. And if last year's national tournament is any indication of Dubois' plans for 2011, the Pilots will be in for quite a ride. Coming off a broken hand, Dubois made her triumphant return at nationals to the tune of an 8-15 performance with two game winning homeruns and eight RBI.

In addition to Boocher and Dubois, the Pilots have several key newcomers who have been impressive during the fall and will be counted on as impact players in the spring.

"I thought our power numbers would be down in 2011," said Welsh. "But after seeing our girls perform this fall in practice and exhibition games, I think we are going to be just fine in the power department. The return of power combined with the speed I knew we had coming in this season is going to make for a potentially explosive offense in 2011."

Speaking of speed, the Pilots also return NAIA All-American Holly Weaver. Weaver will be entering her third year as the Pilots leadoff hitter. Weaver was the catalyst of the offense last season with 58 stolen bases. Weaver will be joined in the outfield and the base stealing department by sophomore Danie Reilly who in a part time role in 2010 as a freshmen managed to swipe 33 bases of her own.

"This team is full of speed," said Welsh. "I remember when Holly came in as a fresh-



Holly Weaver



Kaitlyn Dubois



Giana Zimmerman

man she was so fast and won every race during practice. This year there are four of them up there competing to win the race. We see Holly lose races now and personally I love that! I know how fast Holly is and when she loses races to her teammates it gets me excited about the potential havoc that will be created on the base paths in 2011."

When asked about the 2011 team's potential, Weaver had this to say, "So far we have really clicked as a team and have a good sense of team unity. We are eager to take on the challenges that the season will bring and are determined to grow stronger together and become better players as one united team."

The final piece of the puzzle is defense and for the Pilots no one has shown their willingness to sacrifice her body to make a play greater than senior Emily Lamkin. Lamkin who was a rock at third base in 2010 will be counted on again in 2011. In addition, Lamkin will be asked to continue her development on the offensive side of the ball which she made great strides in last season before an injury slowed her development.

"I expect the defense as a whole to be very strong this year," said Welsh. "We will have to replace every starter in the outfield but I'm very excited about the potential I see out there. In the infield we have three starters returning and I've seen a lot of athleticism out of project-



Katie Boocher

ed starting shortstop Erin Kotlarz. At catcher, we have two very capable players and we'll just have to see who rises to the top."

2011 marks the first time in four years that the Pilots are not the preseason pick to win the MCC. After substantial losses from the 2010 team, the Pilots are picked to finish second behind Marian University by coaches in the conference. Despite this fact, Bethel remains committed to the same goals it has had over the last few years – win the MCC, advance to NAIA nationals, and compete for a national championship all while using their skills and accomplishments to bring glory to God.

"I have no problems with where the coaches see us," said Welsh. "We lost a lot and we have plenty to prove. This team doesn't want anything handed to them. They know they will have to earn every bit of recognition they get this year and I think they are ready for that."

Seniors Katie Boocher, Kaitlyn Dubois, and Emily Lamkin have all been a part of the team's success over the last three years. They were not part of that 2007 team that put the Pilots on the national map but they have been around since and have contributed mightily to the Pilots' success. While names like Hire, Rassi, Cripe, and Fisher will go down in the record books as some of the best ever to play at Bethel, the 2011 seniors are out to create a legacy of their own.

"Losing a great core of leaders from last year will be hard to replace," says Boocher. "However, with the work ethic and talent Coach Welsh has brought in I expect us to be national contenders once again. The 2011 team is out to prove the naysayers wrong. It is extremely exciting to see how far we have come as a team in a short time together. I cannot wait until February to show what this team is capable of accomplishing."

Lamkin goes on to add, "Looking ahead to the spring I see great things for this young but very talented team. Being an upperclassman it's awesome to see the growth of the younger players on the team just in the fall season. We have already made great strides to becoming a national championship caliber team and we will keep pushing towards that goal every day."

Despite being voted second in the MCC, the Pilots national reputation has them ranked No. 15 in the NAIA to start the 2011 season. Bethel's schedule will allow ample opportunity to prove they belong amongst the nation's elite. The Pilots will face off with five teams ranked in the preseason top 25 including early season contests with No. 3 William Carey University and No. 25 University of Mobile. Bethel will also clash with MCC foe and No. 14 ranked Marian University, Co-No. 15 ranked Olivet Nazarene University (Welsh's Alma mater), and No. 17 ranked Madonna University. The challenging schedule also includes five other schools throughout the season that received votes for the top 25.

To this year's group of seniors it's also about much more than having success in 2011. This group hopes to continue the legacy of Bethel softball that was passed down to them.

"As seniors who have been a part of the past success of this program, it is especially important to show everyone that we can still continue to be successful," said Dubois. "It was great to be a part of the past and now it's our turn to make a difference on our new teammates. I want to leave this year with the bar set high so that the next generation of players can continue with the success of the Bethel College softball program."

With a challenging schedule and a young but talented team, the 2011 season is sure to have its ups and downs. Regardless of the outcome, Welsh is excited to see how the upcoming season adds to the foundation of building a national power.