



Tuesday, January 29, 2002

Preseason softball poll names OU top team

After only two seasons of intercollegiate competition, the OU softball team has been selected as the team to beat in the Mid-Continent Conference in 2002, according to a preseason poll of Mid-Con coaches.

The top three teams in the poll - Oakland, Western Illinois and Southern Utah - were just four poll points apart.

The **Golden Grizzlies** (25-29, 16-6 Mid-Con in 2001) came on late in 2001 to win their first-ever Mid-Continent Conference regular-season title, doing so in just their second season of intercollegiate competition.

Head coach Steve Ogg's team returns many of last season's top performers, including two-team first-team All Mid-Con selection Ericka Burns (Clinton, Ontario), who batted a league-best .407 and scored 36 runs, which also topped the league. Newcomer of the Year Jaymie Voss (Kalamazoo, Mich.) also returns for duty at bat and on the mound.

The **Golden Grizzlies** begin the 2002 season on Friday, Feb. 22, at the Baylor Tournament in Waco, Texas.

Western Illinois (33-21, 16-7 Mid-Con), selected as the number two team in the preseason poll, finished third in the league last season. Head coach Kathy Veroni's Westerwinds swept three games in the Mid-Con Tournament for their second tourney crown in as many years and earned their second straight NCAA Tournament appearance after winning an NCAA Play-In Series. Much of Western Illinois' pop at the plate was lost due to graduation, but it does return four pitchers, including Mid-Con Pitcher of the Year Kristin Smith (Morton, Ill.), who went 7-4 with a 1.72 ERA last season.

Southern Utah (28-36, 17-7 Mid-Con), named the number three team in the preseason poll, finished second in the Mid-Con standings last season and was the Mid-Con Tournament runner-up to Western Illinois for the second straight season. Head coach Laurel Simmons welcomes back Crystal Bingham (Show Low, Ariz.), who batted a team-best .342 as a rookie last year.

University of Missouri-Kansas City (18-35, 12-11) came in fourth in the preseason poll. UMKC earned the final spot in last year's Mid-Con Tournament field, and league coaches have predicted the Kangaroos to finish in the same place this year. Second-year coach Carla Marchetti will have all of the team's top offensive performers from last season, including first-team all-conference pick Amanda Rice (Carrollton, Mo.), whose .315 average last season led the team.

Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis (22-36, 8-16 Mid-Con) was the number five team in the preseason poll. IUPUI missed out on a Mid-Con Tournament appearance last season, but the Jaguars return enough players this season to make a run at a tourney berth. Head coach Julie Bias welcomes back much of her line-up from last year, including seven starters on offense. First-team All-Conference pitcher Megan Fultz (Battleground, Ind.) also returns after striking out 119 batters in 2001, second in the league.

Valparaiso (7-38, 4-16 Mid-Con), selected sixth in the preseason poll, suffered through a tough season in 2001, but head coach Jerry Stieger's team may show a great deal of improvement after a season full of close losses. Utility player Amanda Gilbertson (Albany, Ore.) is back after batting .308 and posting a 3-6 record with 46 strikeouts on the mound.

The top four finishers in the Mid-Con regular-season race will participate in the 2002 Mid-Con Softball Tournament, which is May 3-4 in Independence, Mo., and hosted by UMKC. The tourney champion will receive the league's automatic bid to the NCAA Softball Tournament.

SUMMARY

After only two seasons of intercollegiate competition, the OU softball team has been selected as the team to beat in the Mid-Continent Conference in 2002, according to a preseason poll of Mid-Con coaches. The Golden Grizzlies came on late in 2001 to win their first-ever Mid-Continent Conference regular-season title, doing so in just their second season of intercollegiate competition.

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Modified by CareTech Administrator (webservices@caretechsolutions.com) on Tuesday, January 29, 2002
Article Start Date: Wednesday, November 12, 2003

