OAKLAND UNIVERSITY™

Monday, February 4, 2002

OU picked fourth in preseason baseball poll

A preseason poll of Mid-Continent Conference coaches predicts Oakland University's **baseball team** will finish fourth place in the league this year.

The Golden Grizzlies (11-43, 7-19 Mid-Con) finished in last place last season, but league coaches expect the team has improved.

Fourth-year coach Mark Avery welcomes back a few of his top offensive returnees, including outfielder Nick DiPonio (Highland, Mich.), who batted .318 and pounded out 14 doubles a year ago.

Oral Roberts, which has won each of the last four Mid-Con regular-season and tournament crowns, has taken its customary spot as the preseason favorite. The Golden Eagles, who have appeared in four consecutive NCAA tournaments, received five first-place votes in the poll.

Oral Roberts (48-13, 24-1 Mid-Con) has posted a 50-2 record in Mid-Con play over the last two years, which has helped head coach Sunny Golloway's team earn respect from national poll voters. His squad, which returns seven starters and most its pitching, was ranked 31st by Collegiate Baseball, 45th by Baseball America and 46th by the ESPN/USA Today Coaches preseason polls.

Michael Rogers (Artesia, N.M.) returns to lead Oral Roberts' pitching staff after posting a 14-1 record, 137 strikeouts and 2.37 ERA last season. He earned Mid-Con Co-Pitcher of the Year accolades, was drafted by the Cleveland Indians in the 20th round and was cited as a 2002 preseason first-team All-American by Collegiate Baseball.

Valparaiso (28-29, 14-10 Mid-Con) came in second place in the poll. The Crusaders doubled their win total in 2001, improving from a 14-42-1 record in 2000. Head coach Paul Twenge was honored by his peers as Mid-Con Coach of the Year after leading his team to a third-place finish in the league.

Leading Valpo's cast of returnees in 2002 is last year's Mid-Con Player of the Year, Mark Pedersen (Arden Hills, Minn.). He posted an 8-1 record with a 3.48 ERA on the mound and backed that up by hitting .364 with 13 home runs and 50 RBIs, all career bests.

Southern Utah (23-37, 19-9 Mid-Con) was ranked third in the preseason poll. The team recovered from a 1-21 start last season to finish as the league runner-up in both the regular season and the postseason tournament. Head coach Kurt Palmer's team lost much of its offensive punch from last season, but does return all-conference performer Chris Nelson (Sandy, Utah), who ranked among the nation's leaders with his .408 batting average, while adding eight homers and 43 RBIs.

Western Illinois (12-38, 10-16 Mid-Con), predicted to finish in fifth place behine OU, is under the direction of first-year coach Stan Hyman. The Leathernecks never recovered from their slow start last season, when they lost their first 16 games of the season. Hyman has brought in a good deal of newcomers to blend in with his returnees, which includes infielder Pete Tronick (Morton, Ill.), who batted .357 with 10 homers last year.

Chicago State (15-36, 8-18 Mid-Con) is in the basement of the Mid-Con standings, just as they were last year. Head coach Kevin McCray is excited about some fresh arms that he has brought into the program and is happy to welcome back Jerrold Brock (Chicago, Ill.), who batted .337 with 19 stolen bases last season as a rookie.

The top four finishers in the Mid-Con regular-season race will participate in the 2002 Mid-Con Baseball Tournament, which will be held May 23-25 in Tulsa, Okla., and hosted by Oral Roberts University. The tourney champion will receive the league's automatic bid to the NCAA Baseball Tournament.

OU's first game of the season is Saturday, Feb. 23, at Alabama-Huntsville.

SUMMARY
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