Season Opens Thursday

Hokie Nine Ready for Baseball

With the snow, gusty winds and sub-zero temperatures winter has brought to Blacksburg, its a little hard to perceive of spring, much less comprehend the fact that baseball season is less than a month away for Virginia Tech.

A fact it is, however, and Coach Bob Humphreys and the Gobbler squad are busily preparing for their March 3rd opener at Newberry.

"We’ve been concentrating on conditioning since early January," Humphreys pointed out.

Thanks to the Charles W. Rector Fieldhouse, those workouts haven’t been affected by the harsh winter weather. "But from here on out it may have an effect," Humphreys added.

Last season, the Hokies got off to a fast start on the way to compiling a record-breaking 33-9 mark. Humphreys attributed that fast start to unseasonably warm weather that allowed Tech to practice outside the last two weeks of February.

Weather problems aside, the Hokie coach has several other concerns that are presently occupying the bulk of his efforts. Utmost in that group of concerns is finding replacements for relief ace Orvin Kiser and power-hitter Paul Adams.

Kiser and starter Tom Bailey are the only losses to this year’s pitching staff, but when you combine Kiser’s two victories and 13 saves with Bailey’s four wins, it adds up to quite a loss.

Returnees Jimmy Puglisi (7-2), Duke Dickerson (4-1), Bob Fisher (5-0), Harold Berkey (2-0), Dave Tinsley (2-0) and Timmy Puglisi (1-2), join with newcomers Dean Powell, Mike Rhodes, John Power and Mike McClure to provide Humphreys a promising staff from which to choose a starting rotation.

"I think our starting rotation will be stronger," Humphreys admitted.

The bullpen, however, is another matter.

"Finding a reliever—or relievers—to replace Kiser is of top priority, but right now I don’t know where I stand in the bullpen," Humphreys said. "Once we settle on a starting rotation perhaps I’ll have a clearer picture of just who can benefit us the most as relievers."

While bolstering the bullpen is a major concern, so too is the search for someone to provide the squad with power-hitting. Adams contributed 10 home runs and 55 runs batted in last season while hitting .338.

"We’re not going to have the power we had last season," Humphreys predicted, noting that Lewis Dillion (.289) and Scott Atkins (a .365 hitter out with a back injury) must also be replaced. "Average-wise we should hold our own, but right now I don’t think we will have a consistent long ball threat. . .I would like to be surprised."

Among those returning that could provide that surprise are catcher Wayne Shelton (.321, 7 HRs), outfielder Dennis Duff (.309, 5 HRs) and centerfielder Sandy Hill (.364, 3 HRs). Freshman first baseman Harold Williams and sophomore transfer Tony Metts could also help ease some of Humphreys’ uncertainty.

"Our depth may help solve some of our problems too," Humphreys added. "We’re much deeper at every position than we were last year."

With Shelton; Chip Smith and transfer Larry Snoot, the Gobbler’s have a strong contingent of catchers. Meanwhile, newcomers Skip Dofflemyer (SS), Robbie Jenkins (2B), Steve Daniels (3B) and Williams team with veterans Dan Griel (2B) and Rick Wade (3B) to give the Hokies good infield material. And the outfield, with returnees Hill, Duff and Howie Lind joined by Mike Preissler, Steve Dodd and Melts, also has good depth.

"Everybody is enthusiastic," Humphreys added. "Our veterans know what it’s like to win. They got a taste of the NCAA playoffs last year and they want to go back. Their enthusiasm is carrying over to our younger players.

"There’s going to be more pressure on us this year" he continued. "But we’re optimistic."

"Now, if only it would get warmer."