

Softball

Panthers primed for Schultz's 25th and final season as coach

By JIM LUTGENS
Sports Editor

No matter what happens on the field, this will be an historic season for the NRHEG High School softball team.

It's the 25th, and final, year for Wendy Schultz as the Panthers' head coach.

"I'm just always excited before every season," said Schultz. "It's my 25th one. It's amazing, you know, how every year I'm just still equally as excited to get going for it."

The Panthers enjoyed another successful campaign last spring, finishing 15-7 overall and 9-2 in the Gopher Conference, tying Randolph for the conference championship.

Longtime starting pitcher Sophie Stork, shortstop Ava Kylo, Brenlee Knudson and Haley VanWinkle were the most notable graduates off last year's squad.

Stork was last year's NRHEG co-MVP and was named the Player of the Year in the Gopher Conference. Kylo won the team's Golden Glove and Golden Arm awards.

That's the biggest question for the 2023 Panthers. Who's going to handle the pitching duties? The top candidates are senior Sidney Schultz - Coach Schultz's daughter - junior Faith Nielsen, junior Erin Peterson and freshman Chloe Stork.

Returning starters include Sidney Schultz, last year's co-MVP and Golden Bat Award winner (with Kylo and Faith Nielsen), senior Bree Ihrke, Faith Nielsen, Preslie Nielsen and Hallie Schultz, who returns after missing the entire 2022 season with

"I'm just always excited before every season."
— Wendy Schultz

an injury.

Other varsity prospects include senior Trinity Smith Vulcan, juniors Isabel Stadheim, Elsie Schultz, Tayler Schmidt and Payton Bunn, sophomore Aryanna Howe and freshmen Camryn VanMaldeghem and Adalyn Stadheim.

The captains are Sidney Schultz, Hallie Schultz and Ihrke.

"Obviously it's going to be different not having a Sophie Stork," said Schultz. "She was a five-year starter for us, and obviously just a phenomenal athlete. We'll find out when the first pitch is thrown. I guess we'll probably use a combination of our pitchers, maybe go with the hot hand sort of thing. We'll see."

The Panthers figure to be led primarily by their seniors, Sidney Schultz, Ihrke and Smith Vulcan.

"We also have some other girls on the team that have been on for quite a while," said Schultz. "We have Hallie. It's nice to have her back, because last year, with her shoulder injury, she wasn't able to play with us. But, you know, I think it's just going to be a group effort with the practices we've had so far. It's almost two weeks now of being inside. Of course, they've all jelled really well."

Does knowing this is her last season coaching before retirement make this year anymore special for Coach Schultz?

"Yeah, I mean, it is," said Schultz. "It's weird. It was weird going into the first day of practice thinking that it would be the last one. But I'm just kind of trying not to think about that and just going about business like I normally would."

Sidney Schultz is entering her sixth varsity softball season.

"It's special, obviously, to coach one of your one of your kids," said Coach Schultz. "It's been fun seeing her development to a decent player. Every year, she's actually played a different position for us. We kind of just throw her in wherever we need her. She's just been so fortunate to have so many girls around her that are great athletes and just overall good people."

Schultz expects the Panthers to show continual improvement throughout the season and be playing their best ball at playoff time. She said the team has hard workers, speed and great attitudes. The biggest concern is players moving to positions they haven't played much.

State tournament qualifier Randolph returns almost its entire team and is the preseason Gopher Conference favorite. Bethlehem Academy and Blooming Prairie, who tied for third last year, should also be strong while Hayfield, WEM and USC figure to be a factor.



PANTHER POWER — The 2023 NRHEG High School softball team. Front row from left: Sidney Schultz, Isabel Stadheim. Second row from front: Addy Stadheim, Faith Nielsen, Aryanna Howe, Preslie Nielsen. Back: Camryn VanMaldeghem, Hallie Schultz, Payton Bunn, Bree Ihrke, Erin Peterson, Tayler Schmidt, coach Wendy Schultz, and Trinity Smith Vulcan.

Star Eagle photo by Eli Lutgens

NRHEG SOFTBALL 2023 SCHEDULE		April 21	at TCU	4 p.m.	May 11	Kenyon-W	4:30
April 24	at Faribault BA	4:30	May 12	Austin	4:30		
April 27	Bl. Prairie	4:30	May 15	Maple River	4:30		
May 1	at Hayfield	4:30	May 18	at Medford	4:30		
May 4	JWP	4:30	May 19	Southland	4:30		
May 5	Tourney at Caswell Park						
May 6	Tourney at Caswell Park						
May 9	BP at U of M	6 p.m.					

Track and field

NRHEG girls expect exciting season

By JIM LUTGENS
Sports Editor

It should be an exciting spring for the NRHEG High School girls' track and field team.

The Gopher Conference championship, according to coach Duey Ferber, does not appear out of reach.

"I think the Gopher Conference is wide open this year," said Ferber, whose squad finished second in last year's conference meet.

While the Panthers are not blessed with great overall numbers, they hope the quality of their athletes will be enough to bring home a title.

A long list of athletes graduated last spring: Brittny Anderson, Cora Harpel, Madison Johannsen, Natalie Johnson, Journey Utpadel, Torri Vaale and manager Brittny Rocha.

Decorated returnees include junior Evelyn Nydegger, the MVP of last year's squad, school-record holder and state qualifier Quinn VanMal-

deghem, a freshman, and high-jumper Anika Ladlie, who missed state by one place last year as a 7th-grader.

Also returning are junior Kyra Spies, a two-time section qualifier, and juniors McKenzie Mueller, Malonna Wilson and Lauren Cowell in the throwing events. Ferber also expects points from senior Josie Strom and sophomore Sierra Misgen in the sprints, and freshman Holly Bartness in several events.

"Holly Bartness is like a jack of all trades," said Ferber. "She does anywhere from distance to sprinting. Quinn VanMaldeghem was our only state participant last year. She's got a good chance of going again. Ladlie has been jumping out of the gym right now. The way she's jumping, I would put money on her to possibly go to state."

Strom and Olivia Kofstad are the Panthers' lone seniors.

The rest of the roster: juniors Kyra Cain, Keira Lenort and Annabelle Petsinger, sophomores Elise Aronson and Madisyn Langfit, freshmen Janelle Garrido, Molly Johnson, Lexi McGannon, Winter Peterson, Chloe Riewer, Ava Schember, Gabby Schlaak and Emma Yokiell, 8th-graders Clara Buendorf, Orianna Degan, Paige Johnson, Kylie Olson and Madi Schlaak, and 7th-grader Scarlett Chance.

Ferber enters his 34th season as head track and field coach in New Richland. Assistants are Larry Nydegger, Marc Kruger, Kim Johnson and Brian Belcourt.

Ferber lists JWP and Maple River as the preseason conference favorites. He feels the Panthers should be strong in the hurdles and jumps, but he's concerned about their overall depth.

"We need to have more than one person score in each event," said the

coach, who stated that hard work and grit are the key to success for the 2023 Panthers.

"We lost a lot of people that were like on the fence," said Ferber. "Last year, they came out to experience it. And this year, I didn't have as many of those kids come out. Everybody that's out right now is serious about it, and they're here to get better and to win. So, it's exciting."

NRHEG GIRLS' TRACK & FIELD 2023 SCHEDULE

April 4	at Hayfield	4:30
April 11	at USC	4:30
April 18	at Maple River	4:30
April 25	at Bl. Prairie	4:30
April 28	at Blue Earth	4:30
May 4	NRHEG Inv.	4:30
May 9	True Team at USC	3 p.m.
May 13	Conf. at USC	10 a.m.
May 16 Jr. high conf.	at Triton	4:30
May 18	at Waseca	4 p.m.



VARSITY VETERANS — Returnees for the NRHEG girls' track and field team, are, in front, Makenzie Mueller. Back: Holly Bartness, Josie Strom, Quinn VanMaldeghem, Malonna Wilson, Sierra Misgen, Anika Ladlie, Evelyn Nydegger, Lauren Cowell, and Krya Spies.

Star Eagle photo by Eli Lutgens

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