

Teams chasing BC3 after historic season, first-year softball coach says

Pioneers return top hitter, pitcher from regional championship squad

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Members of the 2018 Butler County Community College softball team are, top row, from left, Jessi Reed, Knoch; Lydia Roth, Erie County; Jesse Yenick, Knoch; Nicole Houk, New Castle; and Alexis Vogan, Slippery Rock. Bottom row, from left, Sydney Natili, Knoch; Alyssa Dailey, Moniteau; Bailey Campbell, Mars; Lauren Smith, Seneca Valley; and Mackenzie Bortmas, Moniteau.

(Butler, PA) The Butler County Community College softball program, coming off its first 20-win season, first National Junior College Athletic Association Division III Region XX championship and a final No. 16 ranking, returns the NJCAA's top hitter, Division III's second-best pitcher and the team's starting catcher in its pursuit of a third consecutive Western Pennsylvania Collegiate Conference crown.

"That," first-year head coach Dan Beebe said, "is definitely a good start. That is where you want to start."

Pioneers center fielder Nicole Houk, a New Castle Area High School graduate who in June became BC3's first softball All-American, led players on all 350 teams across the NJCAA's three divisions in 2017 with a .627 batting average.

Right-handed drop-ball pitcher Jessi Reed, a Knoch High graduate, finished 14-1 and with a 1.32 earned-run average that was second in Division III to only Olivia Fluehr's 0.96 for Rock Valley, Ill.

Catcher Alexis Vogan, a Slippery Rock High graduate, played in 20 games and had a .541 batting average, second-best on BC3's 2017 roster and seventh-best in the NJCAA's Division III.

"A lot of teams will be gunning for us," said Beebe, a BC3 assistant in 2017 who in January replaced retired head coach Roni Mall. "The target will be on our back because of the last couple of years with the success."

Beebe had a 109-20 mark in six years as head coach of the Moniteau High softball program, including leading his team to the state Class AA title game in 2016, his final season with the program.

"I have high expectations"

BC3 in 2017 won its fourth WPCC title since 1989 with an 11-0 victory over Westmoreland County Community College. The Pioneers then swept Anne Arundel, Arnold, Md., in the best-of-3 NJCAA Division III Region XX championships before dropping two games to Suffolk County Community College, of Long Island, N.Y., in the best-of-3 NJCAA District H Tournament in Brentwood, N.Y.

Suffolk County lost 20-0 in the national championship to Fluehr and Rock Valley, which won its fourth consecutive NJCAA title.

The Pioneers finished 20-5 and ranked No. 16 in Division III.

"I have high expectations," Reed said. "We weren't sure last year how we were going to do. And then we ended up in New York and finishing in the Top 16, which was great. So this year I want to go just as far."

Houk batted leadoff in 23 of BC3's 25 games. Among her 52 hits in 83 at-bats were 14 doubles, six triples and six fence-clearing home runs, which included two grand slams in the third inning of a 19-8 victory over the Community College of Beaver County.

She also stole 26 bases without being caught.



Dan Beebe, BC3's first-year head softball coach, had a 109-20 record in six seasons at Moniteau High School.

“You see Nikki and you can’t tell whether she is having a good day or a bad day,” Beebe said. “She is the same person no matter what, a gamer. I don’t think she’s going to feel any pressure as far as the success from last season going into this season. She is going to do what she does and she is going to be successful. She’s a tough out.”

While other players could feel pressure to repeat or improve on a historic performance in a historic season, Houk said she does not.

“Nope,” she said. “I am used to this, how people should be under pressure. I have always had a good batting average all my life, so I am used to it.”

Drop ball “falls off the end of a table”

BC3 opponents in 2017 could not get used to Reed’s pitching. She threw in 74 of BC3’s 132 innings and completed 11 of 15 games.

Reed, with a late-breaking drop ball that sinks at least 6 inches – “when it gets going, it’s like it falls off the end of a table,” she says, and usually “just before it crosses the plate,” according to catcher Vogan – struck out 57 batters and walked only 15 in 2017.

“It will be knee-high,” Vogan said, “and the next thing you know, it will be at the middle of your shins.”

Leaving batters, Vogan said, muttering ““Oh my gosh. I did not expect that.””

Beebe expects his middle infield to be solid with freshmen Sydney Natili, a Knoch High graduate and shortstop, and from Alyssa Dailey, a Moniteau graduate who played second base on his 2016 state championship team.

“(Reed) is more of a ground ball pitcher, so the ball is on the ground a lot,” Beebe said. “We had a nice shortstop last year in Noel (Pfabe, of Butler) and we look for Sydney to step right in where Noel was. And that is what we want. We want ground ball outs. We want to keep the ball on the ground. And rely on our infield and our defense to make the plays for a good pitcher like Jessi.”

Lydia Roth, of Erie County, returns to the outfield for BC3. Joining Natili and Dailey are freshman outfielders Jesse Yenick, of Knoch; Lauren Smith, of Seneca Valley; and Mackenzie Bortmas, of Moniteau; and freshman third baseman Bailey Campbell, of Mars.

BC3 opens its season at 3 p.m. March 19 by hosting a doubleheader against Westmoreland County Community College at Laura Doerr Memorial Park, Saxonburg.