

After being ranked as 11th in the nation, the baseball team hopes for a state victory

written by WILL CLOUGH
photo by KAITLYN STRATMAN

RANKED AND READY

Three numbers are running through the East varsity baseball team's minds: 18, 14, 11. They aren't the number of wins this season, or number of losses for that matter. They're not some RBI average, or the number of home runs the boys have hit. No, they're rankings. National ones.

According to three of the major baseball polls, the Lancer baseball team has been ranked among the top teams in the nation for both preseason and current season outlooks.

USA Today, Baseball America and Collegiate Baseball Newspaper have ranked the team 18th, 14th and 11th in the nation respectively. This evaluation is based on last year's season, current results, quality of players and strength of their schedule. Their rankings predict a competitive and optimistic season that will follow the 19-5 winning streak from last year.

Coming off of a record-breaking season, the team won the most games in school history and received the highest seed in postseason standings. In addition, they won the title as Sunflower League champions and took third place in state. This year, they have four Division I signee athletes and five returning seniors - a combination they hope will be unstoppable.

The boys first began to realize just how unstoppable they could be when the first poll came out. Varsity head coach Jarrod Ryherd gathered the team into his office to tell them the news himself.

"At first the ranking kind of shocked us," senior Henry Churchill said. "It felt good to be

recognized for the talent and all the hard work we have put in."

Ryherd also acknowledges that it has been rewarding for the boys to achieve success and confidence like this so early in the season. But he says that their true sights are set at the state level, not the national one.

"I think the guys are taking [the polls] in stride," Ryherd said. "They're having fun with it and they think it's a cool thing, but they also know that they need to play their game or they're going to get beat... our goal is simple, to win state."

The expectation to win state is even higher this year after losing to Shawnee Mission Northwest in the semifinals last year, senior Joey Wentz explained. The Lancers went into the game feeling confident, but a series of quick consecutive runs scored by Northwest in the fifth inning left East feeling disappointed and they lost all hopes of continuing their season any farther.

But with seven varsity pitchers this year and a team composed of almost entirely upperclassmen, Wentz thinks they will be ready to take the championship.

They've already begun the season undefeated with wins against both Blue Valley and Shawnee Mission Northwest - the team that beat them in last year's tournament. Wentz and junior Zeb Vermillion combined to throw a no-hitter on the first game against Blue Valley and the Lancers allowed 3 runs in the game against Northwest. Wentz attributed this success to the fact that this year's boys have more experience and are accustomed to playing under

pressure.

"We've returned a lot of guys who have played in big league games," Wentz said.

It's this kind of experience playing in such games as the state tournament and sunflower league championship that Ryherd said has made the difference in national polls and this year's season so far.

Along the way, the Lancers will face some local competition that will put their national ranking to the test. They want to remain focused on beating these teams and building on their already undefeated season. Some of their biggest competition for the season will include Blue Valley North and Lawrence Free State - the defending state champion.

And according to Churchill, one of the biggest challenges the team will face this year is what they call "trap games." In these games, the boys are scheduled to play an average or mediocre team, followed by a tough opponent. Churchill explains that it's easy to overlook this first team in anticipation of the second game, then end up being caught off guard.

In the same way, the boys are trying to be careful to avoid a "trap season" of sorts. They want to remain vigilant and not become distracted by their ranking, but rather use it to motivate themselves to reach the state podium later this spring.

"We try not to think about [the polls too much] because at the end of the day it's just a number," Churchill said. "And that number doesn't win you games, it's the team you put out on the field [that does]."

of the BIGGEST GAMES SEASON



April 9

BLUE VALLEY NORTHWEST

State Ranking: Fourth

They've got a good pitcher that's going to K-State and throws pretty hard. That'll be a good match up for us.

— senior Joey Wentz



April 26

LAWRENCE FREE STATE

State Ranking: Second

They're the returning champs. They've got three division one arms, so they're definitely one of the top teams in the state.

— coach Jarrod Ryherd