

Give the Ravens an ‘A’ for having a ‘B’

by **ERICK WALKER**

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Auburn Riverside fastpitch coach Chris Leverenz is never one to hit the panic button.

Having depth in the pitching rotation, the most critical part of any fastpitch team, can do that for a coach.

Which helps explain how Leverenz is able to remain calm these days despite the fact that ace pitcher **Amanda Fitzsimmons** underwent offseason shoulder surgery to clean up a flared rotator cuff and a torn bicep tendon.

As has been the case for what seems like forever at Auburn Riverside, if Plan A falls through, the Ravens always manage to have a Plan B. And this year, while Fitzsimmons is busy getting back to 100 percent, the Ravens will be able to turn to that Plan B, which is a stable of young pitchers more than capable of holding their own.

That includes newcomers Jamie Koenig, left-hander Rian Lingl, and Kaity Sellers.

Lingl and Sellers both had older sisters – Tana and Ashley, respectively – who are among the best pitchers the program has ever produced and both of whom went on to play at the collegiate level.

“I feel pretty fortunate. I have six kids who can throw in my program somewhere,” Leverenz said. “We’ll be able to get those kids experience, which will really help us for the future.”

Being able to rest and, ultimately, save Fitzsimmons for another state push is simply a bonus.

“It’s going to help a lot,” Leverenz said. “(Fitzsimmons) will be more rested (toward playoff time).”

That depth also is what has Auburn Riverside, which opens the South Puget Sound League 3A season on March 25 at Franklin Pierce, tabbed as the league favorite again this season.

And while Fitzsimmons is not yet 100 percent, it remains clear the Ravens will only go as far as her capable right arm will allow. In two years, Fitzsimmons, a junior, has blossomed quickly into one of the program’s best-ever players.

Three years ago, she became the SPSL Division’s first freshman ever to win the league MVP award. Last year, she took home first-team all-league honors after posting an 0.30 earned-run average while striking out 78 batters in 47 innings of work.

But Fitzsimmons, who has become the league’s most feared pitcher, also delivered with the bat last season, ranking second in the SPSL 3A in average (.615), home runs (2) and steals (8).

But it’s that golden right arm that has most wondering.

“(The doctor) just cleaned up the tear, so I have 50 percent of a tendon and cleaned out the flaring a little bit,” said Fitzsimmons, who injured the shoulder on a throw from the outfield last year, but didn’t have surgery until Nov. 30. “Right now, everything is normal. Not everything yet is at its best, but I’m working on it.”

And the Ravens, who typically challenge for the league title and a state berth every year, are counting on Fitzsimmons getting to 100 percent by the end of the spring.

In the meantime, the Ravens remain loaded as ever, despite the loss of all-leaguers Kelley Kaneshiro, Kristine Kaneshiro and Katie Payne to graduation.

Along with their wealth of talent in the pitching circle, the Ravens also return all-league outfielder Katie Grad, senior Brittany O'Malley (outfield) and junior Roxy Swarcz (catcher). Freshmen Koenig and infielder/outfielder Hannah Melick also are expected to make a big impact.

Throw in sophomore Mercedes Wetmore, a shortstop who played club ball previously and who made a name for herself on the basketball court the last two seasons, and there's plenty of reason for optimism.

"They're young," Leverenz said of her team. "We have some work to do, but I think they're going to do great."

Ultimately, though, everything hinges on Fitzsimmons, who's just as capable of bringing the heat as she is in delivering an array of offspeed pitches.

And, just like their coach, there won't be any panic among the players, either.

"Amanda's a huge part of our team, that's for sure," Grad said. "She can hit the ball far and is a great pitcher. Just knowing her work ethic, I know she'll be rehabbing and doing whatever it takes to get to where she needs to be to help us out."

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SPSL 3A

FASTPITCH: AT A GLANCE

- FAVORITE: Auburn Riverside.
- CONTENDERS: Bonney Lake, Enumclaw.
- SLEEPERS: Auburn Mountainview, Sumner, Franklin Pierce.

FIVE TO WATCH

Name School Pos. Jr. Amanda Fitzsimmons Aub. Riv. OF/P

Notable: Named SPSL North MVP as a freshman, first-teamer in SPSL 3A a year ago. Can hit and pitch with the best players around.

Jr. Caitlin Colvin Bon. Lk. P/IF Notable: Struck out 50 batters in 31 innings pitched while posting the second-best ERA (0.68) in the league.

Jr. Taylor Franich Enumclaw SS Notable: Led league in steals last year (16) and was among leaders in average (.439), runs scored (17), batting average (.439) and doubles (4).

Sr. Katie Grad Aub. Riv. OF Notable: School's spark plug on basketball floor does the same on softball diamond. First-teamer was among league leaders in average (.487) and RBIs (14) last season.

Jr. Jill Stewart Enumclaw P Notable: First-team all-leaguer struck out 78 batters in 58 innings pitched last season and tied for the league lead in wins (8).