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## (Neb.)- Cougar Baseball Opens Seasons This Weekend



By: Jeremy Anderson Posted at: 02/12/2014 10:32 AM

(Scottsbluff, NE)- The Western Nebraska Community College baseball team will open up the season this weekend when plenty of optimism.

Not only do they have a strong pitching staff, but the team opens the season with two catchers that already inked Division I letter of intents. All this talent has WNCC head coach Mike Jones optimistic on the season.

"Right now we are stacking up well. It looks like we will have enough depth," Jones said. "We are looking forward to the season. We have a great group of guys and looking forward to getting on the uniforms and getting out there playing. We are going to make a bunch of mistakes early, but I think we are really intelligent and have a good guys."

The Cougars open the season this weekend when they battle Barton Community College Saturday and Sunday in La Junta, Colo. They will then face Otero on Monday in a 9-inning contest.

Jones said the team is anxious to get the season started this weekend.

"We are going to take on Barton down on Otero's field. Trying to find a place that isn't covered in snow is hard," he said. "Otero has a really nice field and it has astro turf. They are going to allow us to use their field and then we are going to stick around and play Otero in a non-conference, 9-inning game on Monday."

The Cougars, who qualified for the Region IX playoffs last season before falling to Region IX champions Northeastern Junior College in the first round, have plenty of talent on this year's squad. The biggest talent lies with the pitching staff with plenty of sophomores and incoming freshman dotting the rotation.

"The pitching staff is what looks real strong right know," Jones said. "There are quite a few guys that are stepping up for us right now. John Timmins has been a guy that has really taken a lead role on the pitching staff. He is a guy that pitched a lot of innings for us a year ago and had a really good fall."

Besides Timmins, who is a big 6-foot-4, right-handed pitcher from Bellevue, Nebraska, the staff will include Jason Palser, a left-handed flamethrower from Denver, also returns to the mound. The Cougars also have the services this year on the pitching staff from Gabriel DeLa Rosa, a returning sophomore that was a position player last season.

The pitching staff is also bolstered by the arms of sophomores Kyle Shoutta, a 6-1 right-hander from Denver, Cameron Snyder, 6-0 right-hander from Aurora, Colo., and Felix Ojeda-Sanchez, a right-hander from Venezuela. The freshman prospects include Dylan Michaels of Olathe, Kan., Jacob Frick, of Ft. Morgan, Colo., Mason Cratty, of Surrey, British Columbia, and Mason Munford, of Cheyenne, Wyo.

The Cougars also have depth behind the plate with Antony Apadaca of Wheatland, Wyo., and JT Core of Leavenworth, Kan. Both players inked with Division I schools in November, Apadaca with Northern Colorado and Core with North Dakota State. Jones said both are solid catchers.

“We have two really good catchers,” Jones said. “They are guys that can really manage the game and take care of things defensively. They can stop the running game. Control the bunts. Call a good game. That allows us, the coaching staff, to work on scouting reports and work with those guys for a game plan. They will split a lot of time behind the plate and when they aren’t catching, they will be in the lineup as a DH.”

The offensive side of the ball will see a mix of a lot of doubles and some speed.

“We have some speed and it is not a lot of speed, but we are not slow either,” Jones said. “We are just solid athletes all the way through the lineup. We are not going to be a lineup of home run guys; we are going to be a lineup of doubles and we are going to create a lot of scoring opportunities by taking a lot of extra bases. We are going to utilize the bunting game more than we have in the past. I really think we can be one of the best hitting teams in the conference when it comes to hitting doubles.”

Early on Jones is expecting to get a lot of players some plate appearances. He also sees playing time from several local players, including former WESTCO players Joe Moran and Ty Wilson. Tharyn Curtis, also a former WESTCO player, is on the team but will be sidelined with an injury.

Other sophomores on the team include Andy Padron of Homestead, Fla.; David Martinez of Hialeah, Fla.; and Matt Zilla, of Holyoke, Colo.

The freshmen include Luis Sotomayor of Kissimme, Fla.; Ty Barker of North Platte; Cody Gifford of Pleasant Hill, Mo.; Taylor Erickson of Englewood, Colo.; Tyler Pollock of Chugwater, Wyo.; Justin Smith of Valentine, Neb.; Dionisio Diaz of Homestead, Fla.; Dylan Michaels of Olathe, Kan.; Alexis Vivas of Caracas, Venezuela.; Jacob Frick, of Ft. Morgan, Colo.; Mason Critten, of Surrey, British Columbia; and Mason Munford, of Cheyenne, Wyo.

This season’s Empire Conference schedule and regional tournament has a different flare to it this season. This year, the teams will play 40 regional games. The tournament will also be different as well as it will be a four team double elimination tournament at the site of the conference winner.

“I expect us to be somewhere in the top four,” Jones said. “If we stay healthy and continue to develop the way we are developing, we will be a team in the top half.”

The Cougars first home game, weather pending, will be Sunday, Feb. 23 when they host Northeastern Junior College. The Cougars will also host McCook on March 2.