

## ISU now three-time preseason favorite

Written by Todd Marver, Senior Staff  
Tuesday, 05 February 2013 10:13

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Illinois State softball has become synonymous with preseason favorite, as the Redbirds have been picked first in the Preseason Missouri Valley Conference Poll for the third consecutive season. ISU shares the top spot with Southern Illinois, as both squads received 85 votes each including two first place votes.

"It is an honor that the other schools in the Valley recognize us as one of the top programs," ISU senior Elizabeth Kay said. "It's definitely a motivator for us."



Last season, the 'Birds finished second in the MVC during the regular season with an overall record of 37-23 and 18-8 in the MVC. ISU won the conference tournament in 2012 with a 13-3 victory over 2013 preseason MVC co-favorite SIU to qualify for the NCAA tournament for the third straight year.

The Redbirds advanced to the final of the Columbia, Mo., NCAA regional before falling to the host school, Missouri 2-1. ISU is looking to get over the hump and advance beyond the regional round, which has not been done in school history.

"Our team goals are definitely to win the regular season, win the MVC tournament, go on to the regionals and getting past regionals would be our ultimate goal," Kay said.

The Redbirds return a total of 14 players from 2012. ISU only lost two offensive starters to graduation from last season's squad and return the other seven including a trio of preseason

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all-conference picks in seniors Jhavon Hamilton (2010, 2011 and 2012 All-MVC Second Team), Kay (2010 and 2011 All-MVC First Team, 2012 All-MVC Second Team) and Lauren Kellar (2012 All-MVC Second Team).

“They have been the nuts and bolts of our program for the last three years. They got a lot of playing time as freshmen and moved on to their sophomore and junior seasons and received accolades,” ISU head coach Melinda Fischer said.

Hamilton led the team in both home runs (12) and RBI (37) in 2012, while Kay was second on the squad in the same two categories with seven home runs and 31 RBI. Kellar led the Redbirds with 12 stolen bases. Fischer believes the trio is also important to the team from a leadership standpoint.

“They’re the people you look to for leadership both on and off the field,” she said. “I think their roles have emerged from the confidence they have built within themselves, and they are very valuable to this program. The other players learn from them and watch them to pick up things that are vital to being successful at the Division I level. They are in positions where they provide a lot of leadership, even though they might not be the captain’s role.”

Despite returning seven out of nine offensive starters from last year, the Redbirds lost two of their main pitchers to graduation. Former Redbirds Jordan Birch and Megan Warner accounted for nearly 90 percent of ISU’s innings pitched in 2012.

The Redbirds will be relying on a collective effort from junior Taylor Baxter, sophomore Sophia Perez and freshmen Erin Rodriguez and Regan Romshek to step up and take on an increased role to fill the shoes lost.

“You just have players step in and take advantage of an opportunity,” Fischer said. “You’re not

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going to have a Jordan out there and you are not going to have a Megan out there. So I think it's going to be a lot of development along the way."

ISU opens the 2013 campaign at the Getterman Classic in Waco, Texas with five games, including two contests against Sam Houston State, two matchups with Baylor and a game against Northern Illinois.

"Getting a second opportunity to play at least Sam Houston and Baylor will tell you right away what your strengths and weaknesses are because those teams have been practicing outdoors since they returned in January," Fischer said. "It's a great evaluative tool to see where you are and go from there."