

Loyola Women's Softball Midseason Report

Home runs and sunshine contribute to softball success

By Joe Flaherty

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It has been a tale of two seasons for the women's softball team. One of the only common threads between their rough start and their current hot streak has been Mother Nature's consistent torment on their schedule.

The Ramblers have been forced to cancel or postpone eight games so far this season, and they've had to reschedule a handful of other games due to inclement weather.

The bitter cold, thunderstorms and even the occasional spring snow flurries haven't just thrown the team's game schedule for a loop. With their diamond at Hoyne Field literally frozen well into the start of the season, the Ramblers have had to get creative with how to use practice time.

They've resorted to using the turf field next to Mertz Hall as well as Gentile Arena, but neither of those facilities can replicate game action on a softball diamond.

The Ramblers entered the 2013 campaign as the preseason No. 1 seed in the Horizon League as voted by the coaches, but they only managed to go .500 over their first 24 games. Head Coach Missy Beseres said the weather was partially to blame.

"This spring has been like nothing I've ever seen before," Beseres said. "We really haven't gotten a chance to play on a consistent basis. In our last series, the first day we played, [it] was 85 degrees in Youngstown, [Ohio] on Thursday, and when we woke up on Friday it was snowing."

Recently, the Ramblers have been able to cope with the weather and live up to their preseason No. 1 ranking, winning 13 of their last 17 games.

The team has been able to turn their fortunes around thanks in part to their strong pitching staff, headlined by junior and reigning Horizon League Pitcher of the Year Brittany Gardner. Ramblers pitchers have allowed three or fewer runs in nine of their last 13 victories.

Another key to Loyola's turnaround has been the bat of junior third baseman Lauren Moore. Unlike Mother Nature, what she's been producing at the plate all season has been a huge boost for the Ramblers.

After totaling only seven home runs over her first two seasons, Moore has already sent 11 homers over the fence this season. That ties her with Kat Krause and Jenna Grim for Loyola's single-season record, and she still has seven contests to try to break that record. Moore credits her recent power surge to improving her mental and physical strength.

“I can tell I’ve become a lot smarter at the plate,” Moore said. “I commit to the one pitch I’m looking for. Also, a lot has to do with Strength Coach Shin Tahara for pushing me every day in the weight room and helping me become stronger than I have been in previous years.”

Moore has already set career highs with a .359 average and 36 RBIs to go along with her 11 home runs. College Sports Madness named her the Horizon League Player of the Week for the period of April 7-13, during which she batted .400 with six RBIs over four games.

Moore isn’t the only Rambler who has set her sights on breaking a school record this season.

Coming into the season, senior outfielder Brooke Andresen needed only 11 hits to eclipse Loyola’s career mark of 177 set by Ellen Antonacci in 1998.

With a double in the fourth inning of Loyola’s 6-3 victory against the University of Western Michigan on March 9, Andresen collected her record-breaking 178th career hit. Her record now stands at 208 hits, and counting.

On the mound, Gardner became Loyola’s all-time strikeout leader during an April 20 victory over the Cleveland State Vikings. Her sixth punchout of the game broke the record, and she tacked on two more to push her career record to 538 strikeouts.

Gardner has won eight of her last 10 decisions, and she’s now only eight victories away from breaking Kari Kiler’s season career record of 51 wins.

The individual records are numerous, but the team’s main focus is continuing this hot streak and finishing out the remainder of conference play on a high note. With six of their final seven games against conference opponents, Loyola has a chance to earn the No. 1 seed in the Conference Tournament as well as the right to host it.

The Ramblers are currently 11-4 in conference, which puts them in second place behind UIC. Beseres hopes the Ramblers can maintain this momentum during the part of the season that matters most.

“We have gotten key production from each member on our roster, but we haven’t been putting that production together consistently,” Beseres said. “The girls know they are capable of great things, and are hungry for the tournament, but we still have two series at home that we need to take care of first.”

Their seeding remains to be seen, but what should fans expect from the team in this year’s tournament?

“If we take one game at a time, and play together like we know how to, the Horizon League Tournament can be ours,” Moore said. “Moving to the Missouri Valley

Conference next year is a huge motivation for us. We want to be the first and last team to make history here for Loyola softball in the Horizon League.”

The Ramblers are coming off a series victory against the Cleveland State University Vikings over the weekend. They took two of their three games on the road to push their overall record to 23-15.

Loyola will visit DePaul on April 25 before their final two series against conference members Green Bay and Wright State. The Horizon League Tournament will kick off on May 8, three days after the regular season ends.