

LUC Women's Softball Season Preview

The Ramblers are looking to avenge last season

By Joe Flaherty

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An outdoor practice on an overcast February afternoon in Chicago isn't usually cause for excitement. But for Loyola's women's softball team, it signifies another step towards what they've been eagerly awaiting for months: the start of their 2013 season.

The team is ready to start fresh and move on from 2012's demoralizing ending. To get their first Horizon League Tournament appearance since 2004, the second-seeded Ramblers shut out Green Bay 2-0 and trounced Butler 9-1 en route to a matchup with the top-seeded Valparaiso Crusaders, where they needed to win one of two games.

Loyola scored the game's first run in the top of the third inning, but the Crusaders pushed one across in the bottom of the sixth, which eventually sent the game into extra innings. With two outs in the bottom of the ninth inning, Valparaiso's Angie Doerffler brought in the winning run to force a winner-takes-all rematch for the conference tournament championship.

In the rematch later that day, junior Lauren Zaworski delivered a clutch RBI single for the Ramblers in the top of the seventh inning to tie the game and seemingly set up another extra inning affair. But Doerffler once again proved to be Loyola's kryptonite, as her RBI double in the bottom of the inning won the game and the tournament for the Crusaders.

The Ramblers received outstanding pitching performances from junior Brittany Gardner and sophomore Amanda Ciran, but they weren't enough to earn the Ramblers their first NCAA Tournament berth in program history.

Valparaiso's experienced roster and the Ramblers' lack of clutch hits with runners on base proved to be too much to overcome. But the outcomes from these season-ending losses weren't all negative.

"It's probably the best thing that has happened to us," said Head Coach Missy Beseres. "I don't think you can ask for a better motivator from when we finished in May leading up to [now]. I don't look at it as a bad thing."

That new motivation has ramped up the Ramblers' work ethic, and the Horizon League is taking notice. On Feb. 6, Loyola received six of the eight possible first-place votes in the 2013 Horizon League Softball Preseason Coaches Poll, making them the number one ranked team in the conference heading into this season.

"With expectations, you're going to have some pressure," said senior outfielder Brooke Andresen in regards to the team's ranking. "But I know we're all really excited to have it under our belt this year to get going and defend that number one spot."

Andresen, a three-time First Team All-Horizon League outfielder, is one of the eight starting position players who will be returning this season. The Ramblers will also welcome back their top three pitchers from last season: Ciran, Gardner and Keali Engelkens.

This group of veterans will welcome an incoming class of six freshmen to the team, creating an ideal mix of experience and youth going forward. In the limited time they have spent with the team, the freshmen have already been welcomed with open arms.

“We all get along so well,” said junior pitcher Gardner, the reigning Horizon League Pitcher of the Year. “The team chemistry is unbelievable. We always hang out together, we do everything together. It’s our family.”

That strong team dynamic is apparent both on and off the field, as many of the upperclassmen such as Andresen and Gardner aren’t just trying to teach the new freshmen, but learn from them as well.

For Andresen, the start of the season was a bittersweet moment, signaling the beginning of the end of her time as a Rambler. But she was as excited as the rest of her teammates to open play last weekend in the Kickin’ Chicken Classic in Myrtle Beach.

The Ramblers looked like a true number one team in their season opener as they rolled past Rhode Island by a score of 7-0.

Gardner picked up right where she left off last season by tossing a one-hit shutout, the second of her career. Junior Lauren Moore belted a three-run home run in the first inning, and the Ramblers never looked back.

After the next three games of the Kickin’ Chicken Classic were rained out, the Ramblers faltered a bit at the hands of Coastal Carolina. Moore notched another home run in a 5-1 loss in game one of the double header against the Chanticleers.

After jumping out to a 3-0 lead in game two, Gardner could not make the lead hold up as she allowed five runs over six innings.

Despite the slow start for the team, Andresen collected three hits to put her career total at 169. She continues to inch closer to Ellen Antonacci’s school record of 177 career hits.

The Ramblers are now 1-2 and will head to Clearwater, Fla., for the USF-Under Armour Invitational. Their first game will be against the Quinnipiac Bobcats on March 1.