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Photo by Tracy Dreslinski
 Brother Rice sophomore Andrew Sohn (19) is greeted by teammates after hitting a home run against Orchard Lake St. Mary's in its season-opening win April 4. After winning a state title a year ago, the Warriors return 15 players, including eight starters.

A curtain call for the Warriors?

With 15 players and eight starters back, Brother Rice has eye on another state title

By Mike Moore
 C & G Sports Writer

FRANKLIN VILLAGE — If there's one truth about athletics, it is that no matter the level of competition or the sport, guarantees don't exist.

Upsets happen.

Hearts are broken and Cinderella stories emerge on a regular basis.

Still, you'd be hard-pressed to find a team more capable of a guarantee than this year's Birmingham Brother Rice baseball squad.

And that statement comes in the first days of April, before the team has played a single game.

A year ago, the Warriors closed out the season with a 34-6 overall record, the 34th and final victory coming in the Division 1 state final against Saline High.

The 8-0 score in that last game was perfectly reminiscent of how dominant Brother Rice was all season. The scary part now, is how the same situation could play itself out again.

"The expectations are big," coach Bob Riker gushed.

With good reason.

The Warriors, who opened the 2009 campaign with a doubleheader sweep of Orchard Lake St. Mary's April 4, return 15 players from the state-title team, including eight starters and five senior pitchers. Andy Lentz, the team's leader, motivator and backbone at shortstop was the lone senior to graduate.

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Asked if it almost seemed unfair to have so much talent back, Riker just laughed.

“Well,” he said, searching for the right words, “it makes for a season where you can do some good things.”

To their credit, they aren’t taking anything for granted. Senior pitcher and Birmingham resident Matt Conway, who was 11-1 last season with a 2.07 ERA and 80 strikeouts in 88 innings pitched, explained how defending the title may be even harder than it was to win it the first time.

“You talk about a bull’s-eye,” he said smiling during an April 2 practice. “We’re certainly going to have one on our backs this year. ... Every team is going to bring their best against us. We’re going to see No. 1 pitchers all season. It’s going to be up to us to rise to that challenge.”

Of course, with their pitching staff, rising to the challenge may be a bit easier. Conway will anchor the rotation again, but also back in the mix are senior Derek Kilmer, who was 8-0 a year ago with three saves and a 1.40 ERA, senior Brad Zambron (4-3, 2.87 ERA) and senior Brian Kurzawa (7-1, three saves and a 1.67 ERA in 46 innings).

“Pitching is the name of the game, and we’ve got some good ones,” Riker said. “That’s a huge advantage for us.”

Another advantage is the attitude the guys have adopted.

Despite the 34 wins and the state title, Riker, Conway and junior shortstop Pat MacKenzie — Lentz’s replacement — were all quick to mention the lone goal bypassed in 2008.

“Every year we strive to win the (Catholic League Central) division, win Catholic’s at Comerica and then win states,” MacKenzie, a Royal Oak resident, explained. “In losing to (Dearborn) Divine Child at Comerica, we only accomplished two of them. If we’re going to do all three this year, and not get complacent or big-headed, it’s going to have to be our attitude that carries us. Nothing’s going to be handed to us.”

“To be honest, I had my concerns about the guys being overconfident here at the start,” said Riker, who also said his team has unfinished business to make up for in regard to the DC loss. “To their credit, I can’t complain at all so far. They’ve come out focused and ready to play. They understand what’s at stake. They know what our goals are.”

MacKenzie may have said it best when asked about what type of season 2009 would be if the Warriors didn’t win another state title.

“Man,” he said shaking his head. “It’d be a disappointment.”

But if they do win?

“Another dream come true,” he countered. “It’d be another experience to remember for the rest of our lives.”

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