

By Jan Schultz

The Imperial Republican

Finishing the 2012 high school softball season at 3-26 may be seen by some as a season without success.

But, that's not the view of Coach Denise Smith, who said her Lady Longhorn softball team showed notable progress during the short six-week season that concluded for Chase County with a 1-2 showing at districts.

It was the first season since 2009 that Chase County recorded a win. In the past two seasons, while several games were close, the Lady Longhorns finished without a win.

But, more importantly, Smith said she saw a lot of growth among the players.

"There was a lot of improvement in our players," she said, both with the returners as well as the first-year players.

With the returners, what she noticed was a growth in confidence.

Smith said as their confidence grew, she began to expect more from those players, especially on defense. The fundamental parts of the game came more naturally to them, she said.

The coach also said the team was more aggressive with their base-running this season.

That is evident in looking at the stats. Last year, the team had just six stolen bases. That grew to 15 this year.

While the team batting average dropped, Smith said they had a good early start at the plate, then hit a slump midway through the season. Even so, she felt the team had better contact with the ball this year.

Juniors Anna Bauerle, Ally Vrbas and Michaela Space led the team at the plate this season. Bauerle finished with a .394 average, Vrbas earned a .353 and Space finished at .311.

Other starters over the .200 mark were Jodi Koellner and Abbi Vetter. Space led the team in RBIs with 19.

Bauerle, who was chosen the past week as the team's honorary captain, was the starting pitcher in 26 of the 29 varsity games, as well as one JV game.

Five of the 15 girls on the roster were new to the high school softball program, Smith said. Some of them had played ball before, but several years earlier.

She was pleased to see improvement in many aspects of the game with the new players.

Three seniors will leave the team this year—Space, Jordan Gibb and Emily Johnston.

Space has been a three-year member of the team, the last two years in center field. As a first-year player, she was the team's flex player, playing on defense but not batting. Smith said that was because she struggled at the plate then. But, in the past two years, her batting improved greatly, Smith noted, to lead the team in RBIs this season.

Gibb has struggled with injuries since midway through her junior season when she started suffering from a nerve problem in her arm. She was unable to play at all this year. However, she was at all of the practices and games unless an appointment or other activities took her away, Smith said.

She helped with the equipment and kept the book/stats. She was a big support for the team, Smith said.

First year player Johnston had a great attitude all year long, Smith said, and later in the season started at second base. She gained more confidence after using a defensive mask at second.

"Wish we had her more than just this one year," Smith said.

The JV team finished with a 2-6 record, recording wins over Scottsbluff and Cozad, while losing to McCook twice, Wray twice, Gothenburg and Perry, Okla.

Looking ahead

If all the underclassmen return next season, the team will have 12 returners.

Smith said she'd like to see the numbers back up around the 20-player mark because injuries often take a toll on the roster.

She realizes there is a big eighth grade class moving into high school next year and encourages girls to consider softball, especially if they are debating not competing in any sports.

She'd like to get a clinic scheduled in Imperial this summer that would be open to not only high school players, but for some of the younger softball players, as well.

Smith expressed thanks to the city for use of the field and Kent Silvester for upkeep, as well as announcer Al Zuege, Asst. Coach Jason Speck and all the parents for their support.