

2008 SEASON OUTLOOK

The UIC softball team opened the lid on the 2008 season on Feb. 9, trading a worn gym floor for a groomed dirt infield and the snow covered roads of the Windy City for the sunny skies of the Golden State to take part in the USD Classic hosted by the University of San Diego.

The two-day tournament served as the start of the annual winter barnstorming tour for the Flames, where the squad escapes winter for six weeks, prepping itself against the nation's elite for a heated Horizon League race.

The focus of the team is now on getting off to a strong start to the season, but you wouldn't fault the team's senior class for looking ahead. For all the individual achievements and regular-season accolades that this group has earned over the last three years, one goal has eluded them. And it's a goal that can't be earned until this weekend's tournament is long in the rear view mirror.

To say that the careers of seniors Brittany Dixon, Lauren Brennan, Nicole Robinson, Mallory Studzinski, Nikki Rogers and Ashlee Ackermann haven't been successful during their tenure at UIC would be untrue. The group has collected numerous All-League accolades, a pair of regular season league titles and combined to play 746 games for the Flames.

Yet since their arrival on campus, the Horizon League Tournament title and the berth in the NCAA Regional Championships that comes with it has been as elusive as a Jennie Finch drop ball. Each year the team has come tantalizingly close to its ultimate goal, only to see the bottom fall out in the final moments.

In 2005, freezing temperatures in Green Bay, Wis., cooled a potent Flames' offense as UIC, the regular season league champion, was knocked out by the tournament host Phoenix.

In 2006, the Flames once again won the league's regular season crown only to be upset by another tournament host, as a walk-off home run in the bottom of the seventh inning in the championship game against Youngstown State spoiled UIC's NCAA bid.

Last season the Flames were bitten hard by the injury bug. Brennan, a starter at the corner infield spots and a spot starter in the circle, and Robinson, the starting shortstop and team's top run producer, were both lost for the season with torn knee ligaments in the heart of the league race, dashing the team's title hopes.

Despite the bitter memories of seasons past, there is still one final chapter to be written for this group, and co-head coaches Tom Gray and Sarah O'Malley-Fisher have surrounded their seniors



with a wealth of talent and experience. UIC returns eight starters to the field this season. The Flames also welcome in another rock solid rookie class, giving the team arguably its most potent lineup since 2005, the last UIC team to reach the 40-win plateau.

"We have six seniors, three junior veterans, an experienced sophomore class and a great group of incoming freshmen that have worked really hard in the preseason," said O'Malley-Fisher. "With all those weapons, we have high expectations in 2008."

Much like that 2005 team, which was paced by All-American Cameron Astiazaran, this year's squad features an All-America candidate of its own in reigning Horizon League Co-Player of the Year Sarah Clynes.

The junior heads into the 2008 campaign with all the credentials of one of the nation's premier performers. The team's workhorse as its ace pitcher and top hitter, Clynes carried the injury-riddled Flames last season.

In the circle, she earned a team-best 16 wins with her 224 innings of work, more than double that of any teammate. Clynes was even more impressive at the plate, posting a career-best .391 batting average with five home runs and 28 RBI. Her .391 average was the highest mark since Astiazaran's single-season record .491 average in 2005.

Clynes will not have to carry quite the load in the circle for UIC this season as a pair of freshmen – Whitney Orelenna and Carly DeMarco – showed during the fall exhibition season they will be ready to contribute right away.

Orelenna, who posted a 4-1 record in extensive preseason work with wins over Western Michigan and Northern Illinois, should slide into the No. 2 spot in the UIC rotation.

"Sarah returns in the circle as the veteran pitcher and we expect her to be a leader for the Flames," said Gray. "Whitney did an outstanding job in preseason and we expect quality innings from her in the circle this season."

While UIC will count heavily on the contributions of younger players in the circle, the rest of the field is filled with veteran talent as every spot but right field will be filled by a player with at least 50 games of experience.

With the return of Robinson and Brennan from injury, the Flames possess one of the league's most talented infields.

Robinson, a 2006 All-League honoree, will team with sophomore shortstop Brooke Frydendall, a 2007 All-League recipient who hit .333 with three homers and a team-best 31 RBI as a rookie, to give UIC strength both offensively and defensively up the middle.



“Brooke really stepped up as a freshman and handled shortstop extremely well,” said O’Malley-Fisher. “We are very excited to have Nicole back after her injury and will look for her leadership and work ethic to make a positive impact.”

Junior Melissa Marinacci (.294, 3 HR, 18 RBI) returns to first base for the Flames after a strong finish to the 2007 campaign that helped her garner All-Horizon League honors. Brennan will spell Marinacci at first base and also see time at third base alongside Studzinski, who emerged as a potent offensive performer in Brennan’s absence last year.

Behind the plate Gray and O’Malley-Fisher have a bevy of options with Stephanie Chavez, who started 28 games last season splitting time with then-senior Liz Jacoby, penciled in as the opening day starter with utility player Rogers and freshman Claire Donyanavard also seeing time at catcher.

The outfield is anchored by a pair of seniors in All-Horizon League centerfielder Ackerman and left fielder Dixon. Ackerman, a junior college transfer, earned All-Horizon League honors in her first season while Dixon begins her fourth straight season starting in the outfield for the Flames.

“Ashlee was a great addition to our team last year,” said Gray. “She is quick not only in center-field, but also on the bases. No one has worked harder to improve their game than Brittany. She has worked on her game offensively and will also lay out to make a great play in left field.”

The right field spot remains open with newcomers Alicia Abbott, who hit a team-best .600 during the fall preseason, Christie Seddon and DeMarco competing for the job.

Despite many positions seemingly locked in for Gray and O’Malley-Fisher, the Flames will need their entire roster to be ready to play at a moment’s notice during a meat grinder of an opening six weeks of competition.

The opening two months of the schedule is filled with six tournaments that include 12 NCAA Regional teams from last season and four College World Series participants, with a showdown with preseason No. 1 Arizona highlighting the early season slate.

With the depth and talent of this year’s squad, the Flames appear to be ready to take on the challenge.

That challenge begins on Feb. 8 in California and just might end in the second weekend of May with six seniors reaching their ultimate goal, holding a tournament championship trophy and putting UIC back on top of the Horizon League.

UIC SOFTBALL QUICK FACTS

GENERAL INFORMATION

Location Chicago, Ill.
 Founded 1896
 Enrollment 24,541
 Interim Chancellor Eric Gislason
 Athletics Director James W. Schmidt
 Conference Horizon League
 Stadium Flames Field (500)
 Athletic Dept. Phone (312) 996-2772
 Athletics Web Site uicflames.com

COACHING STAFF

Co-Head Coach Tom Gray
 Alma Mater (Yr.) Cal St.-Northridge ('86)
 Co-Head Coach Sarah O’Malley-Fisher
 Alma Mater (Yr.) UIC ('95)
 Record at UIC (Yrs.) 192-175 (6 yrs.)
 Career Record (Yrs.) Same
 Assistant Coach Alison Aguilar Haehnel
 Alma Mater (Yr.) UIC ('04)
 Softball Office Phone (312) 413-5305
 Softball Fax (312) 996-8349

TEAM INFORMATION

2007 Overall Record 20-33
 2007 Horizon League Record 8-7
 2007 League Finish Fourth (Regular-Season)
 Letterwinners Returning 10
 Letterwinners Lost 3
 Newcomers 9
 Starters Returning/Lost 8/1

UIC HISTORY

League Championships 13
 NCAA Appearances 8
 College World Series Appearances 1 ('94)

MEDIA RELATIONS

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