

2007 Season Preview

They say that the best way to figure out the future is to study the past. Books like this can help us do that.

If anyone said that 2006 was the best year in Texas Tech softball history, folks would think that person was crazy, especially given the success of the team in 1998. The Red Raiders went 45-19 and finished fourth in the Big 12. Or, in 1999 the team was 36-31 and advanced to the NCAA Regional Tournament in Fresno, Calif. That team made one of two postseason appearances in the program's history, and even won two games at regionals before being knocked out by the defending National Champion (1998) Fresno State Bulldogs. Some may even make a case that the very best performance by a Texas Tech softball team was in 1997, the second year of a resurgent program, when the Red Raiders finished with a 34-29-1 record, improving from a 4-44 season in 1996!

But, turn to the pages in the historical section of this guide and glance through those seasons. Notice that most games were against programs which don't continually rank among the nation's best. Often sports fans look at the win-loss record of a team in order to determine its success without noting who the competition was. And that's fair. Sports are, after all, one of the few places in life where we really do keep score! So, with a 19-35 record in 2006, the season clearly was not the best year the program has ever seen. But it may have been the most important.

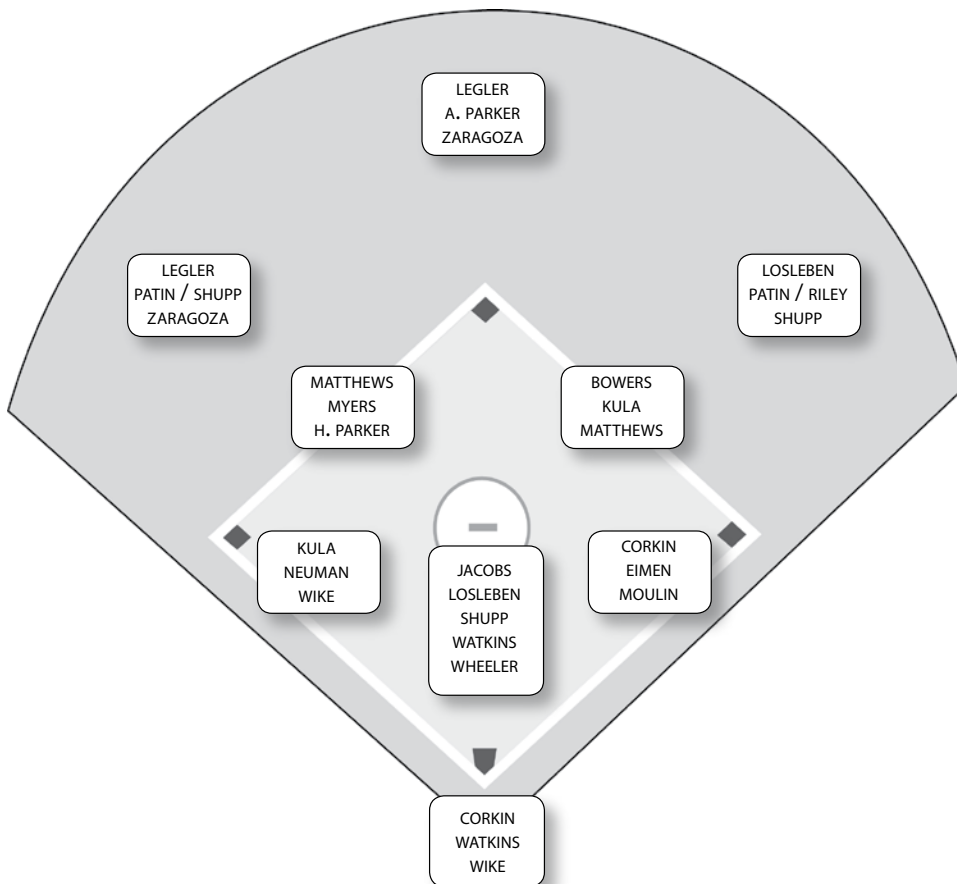
According to the National Fastpitch Coaches Association power rankings, Texas Tech finished the year with the 27th most difficult schedule in the nation. That's the result one gets when combining the Red Raider's win-loss record with their opponent's and their opponent's opponents.

Of the 54 games played in 2006, 29 were against teams who made the NCAA tournament. The Red Raiders faced half of the eight teams who compete at the Women's College World Series (WCWS), in five games in 2006, having played National Champion Arizona twice, as well as and facing Northwestern, the national runners up, Tennessee and Texas, who were each ranked third when Tech played them.

It's possible that the most important aspect of the 2006 season will be evidenced in 2007. Day in and day out throughout the season, the Red Raiders faced the nation's top pitchers. The batting averages and highlights posted by the team during the season of 2006—and there were many strong individual performances—were generated against the nation's best pitchers. What will that mean for a 2007 squad which lost no one from the batting rotation?

2007 Position Chart

(Players listed alphabetically and honestly, there are many more possibilities)



Potential Designated Players: *(Listed alphabetically)*

- 3 JENNIFER BOWERS
- 12 JENNIFER CORKIN
- 5 ELIZABETH EIMEN
- 6 NATALIE KULA
- 4 LEAH LEGLER
- 22 SARAH LOSLEBEN
- 29 DANIELLE MATTHEWS
- 25 BRANDY MOULIN
- 33 AMANDA MYERS
- 8 BROOKE NEUMAN
- 10 ASHLEY PARKER
- 7 HEATHER PARKER
- 1 MONTANA PATIN
- 17 WHITNEY RILEY
- 23 MEGAN SHUPP
- 14 ALEX WATKINS
- 77 RACHEL WHEELER
- 43 ROBYN WIKE
- 19 DEVIN ZARAGOZA



"When I made the schedule for the 2006 team, I knew we would be challenged right from the start," head coach **Teresa Wilson** said. "The jump in difficulty was staggering, really, and my joke throughout the season was to look around and find someone to blame for the calibre of opponents we were playing," she continued chuckling. "Early season games took their toll, but in the end, we made the kind of leap a program has to make in order to build. If you want to really get better—and I mean really compete at the national level—you have to go play all the very best teams. We did that in 2006, and now this squad knows what that means."

Assistant coach **Amy Hanson** joined the program late in the season last year and immediately began working with hitters. This year **Dustin Suiter** joins the staff, complementing Wilson's masterful understanding of the game and Hanson's thoughtful approach to offensive situations and a player mentality with an appreciation of the fundamentals of hitting, really seeing the ball, and playing solid defense. The trio's combined knowledge of the sport and their blend of personalities should lend to dynamic results for players.

With a roster of 20, including five pitchers and at least three-players deep at each position, it's doubtful that any two lineups will look the same. Of the five pitchers, four could easily play another position and three make it very difficult for the coaching staff to keep them out of the lineup as hitters. Depth will not be a factor.

Senior center fielder **Ashley Parker**, who finished 2006 ranked third in the nation in stolen bases with 34, will be the leadoff hitter in an offense which has improved by maturation and with the addition of a trio of talented freshmen: **Leah Legler**, **Danielle Matthews** and **Amanda Myers**. While these freshmen likely will contribute, it is the veterans who must apply their development and experience from a year ago to lead the program. It's a rare team which can feature four position players who have been three-year starters on opening day of their senior years, and Texas Tech has that type of leadership.

Natalie Kula, **Brandy Moulin**, **A. Parker** and **Heather Parker** return for their final campaigns. Joining them is an outstanding class of juniors featuring **Jennifer Bowers**, **Jennifer Corkin**, **Whitney Riley**, **Robyn Wike** and **Devin Zaragoza**. Sophomores **Montana Patin**, **Liz Eimen** and **Brooke Neuman** also return. Each of these returning players saw action in at least 25 games, far from nominal. That experience should be critical.

But ultimately, this is fastpitch softball and any discussion of good teams begins in the circle. Two of the three graduates of 2006 were pitchers who threw a vast number of innings in 2006. The most experienced returner is **Sarah Losleben**, a junior who was the 2006 squad's hard-luck thrower. Her eight losses often resulted from untimely errors. Losleben already ranks second (only to **Amanda Renfro**) in the Tech career record books for strikeouts per 7 innings pitched, averaging more than six fans per full outing. Also returning are sophomore pitchers **Alex Watkins**, who saw no action in the circle in 2006, and **Megan Shupp**, who has three appearances and a total of four innings pitched. Freshmen **Ashly Jacobs** and **Rachel Wheeler** round out that group.

Ask anyone who knows collegiate softball what Coach Wilson is most skilled at and the answer likely will be developing pitchers. Her style is unique but proven, and often learning to pitch for Coach Wilson means re-learning skills which were first acquired at age 7. Both Shupp and Watkins have spent a full year and the fall semester redeveloping the mechanics of how they pitch and are poised to launch their careers in the circle. Both saw ample playing time in 2006 in the field or at the plate, often in pinch-hitting roles, and each will likely see time this year in the field, so their acclimation to this level is higher than may seem apparent from glancing at pitching stats. The freshmen, Jacobs and Wheeler, were introduced to Coach Wilson's style at various of Wilson's camps and clinics, and already have gone through the transformation which Shupp and Watkins experienced last year.

One of the hallmark's of Wilson's style is that pitchers must "maximize the use of their levers," which, roughly translated, means using the full lengths of their legs and arms. That being said, it should be encouraging for Red Raider fans that three of the five pitchers—**Jacobs**, **Watkins** and **Wheeler**—stand six feet tall with their cleats on. (*Actually, Jacobs is more than six feet tall with her shoes off and slouching!*) Coach Wilson doesn't believe in a true rotation, instead preferring the staff approach. So hard throwers like Jacobs and Watkins combine well with off-speed, breaking-ball specialists like Losleben, Shupp and Wheeler to keep hitters off-balance. Of course, each pitcher is trying to create that blend within themselves, but having these variations in a staff can be equally effective. Still, one thing can't be denied: the pitching staff is largely untested.

"Despite the disappointment which comes with a 19-35 record, the returning players have learned so much," Coach Wilson said. "I have been extremely pleased with their work ethic in the off-season and with their willingness to put self-interest aside for the good of the team. There are so many great people on this team. They are trying to do things the right way in the classroom, as citizens and as teammates, and they are trying to build a tradition in this sport at Texas Tech. It's been a very long time since I've been as proud to lead a group of young ladies as I am with this squad," Coach Wilson added.

So, while last year's record was disappointing, the season as a whole should stand out in the future as having been important as a cornerstone to the program.

"You don't build anything of lasting quality without having a solid foundation," Wilson reflected. "Sometimes in this world of instant gratification, we want things to happen faster than they really can. We're all guilty of forgetting that at times. With the core of a team back that faced what this team faced last year, and with the introduction of a few new faces, I like our chances a great deal," she said.

And, if history teaches us anything, it's that Coach Wilson knows how to build winning programs.