

Spring Sports

Saints set sights on second sectional crown

By John Landers
Guest contributor

If you asked former DeSales softball coach Vic Harris about his team's first sectional victory last season, he'd tell you it was nothing less than he'd expected.

No, he isn't joking.

"I made it clear at the beginning of the season," Harris said, "that anything less than a trip to the finals would be a great disappointment."

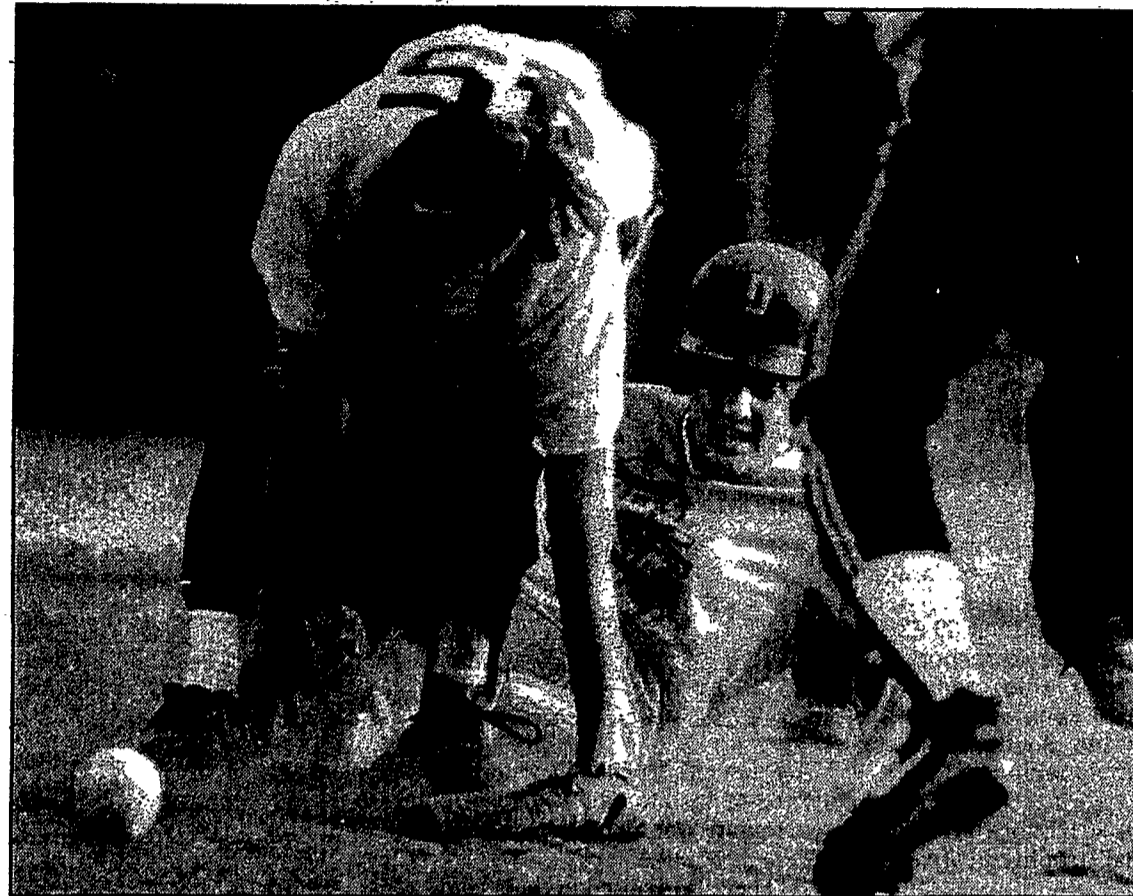
Harris' team did not disappoint him. The "comeback kids" from DeSales High School claimed their first sectional title ever, coming from behind to win 6-2 over Elba last June 9. The Saints scored five runs in the sixth inning to clinch the Class D crown in the title game. It was the team's third comeback in a row, but to Harris' mind, the girls had just worked too hard to settle for a loss.

"We put a lot of pressure on ourselves," Harris said, adding that many of the team had started practicing for that season as early as the previous summer.

Again this season, these comeback kids have set their sights high, aiming for their second sectional title in two years. Though Harris has retired as coach, most of the team has returned under last year's assistants, Randy and Barry Hagadorn. Back in this year's lineup are many of those who made the team shine last year, including pitcher Melanie Chelenza, left fielder Melissa Liberatore, catcher — and 1995 tournament MVP Emily Krakowiak, catcher/third baseman Kim Hagadorn at catcher and center fielder Bridget Buckley.

Except for the head coach's departure, team members are quick to stress that nothing has really changed since last year. The close-knit group of girls that makes up the team's nucleus began running their own practices in early January to get a leg up on the competition. In addition, many of the girls played on a fast-pitch American Softball Association travel team over the summer, where they further honed their skills, playing at the higher level of competition present in that league.

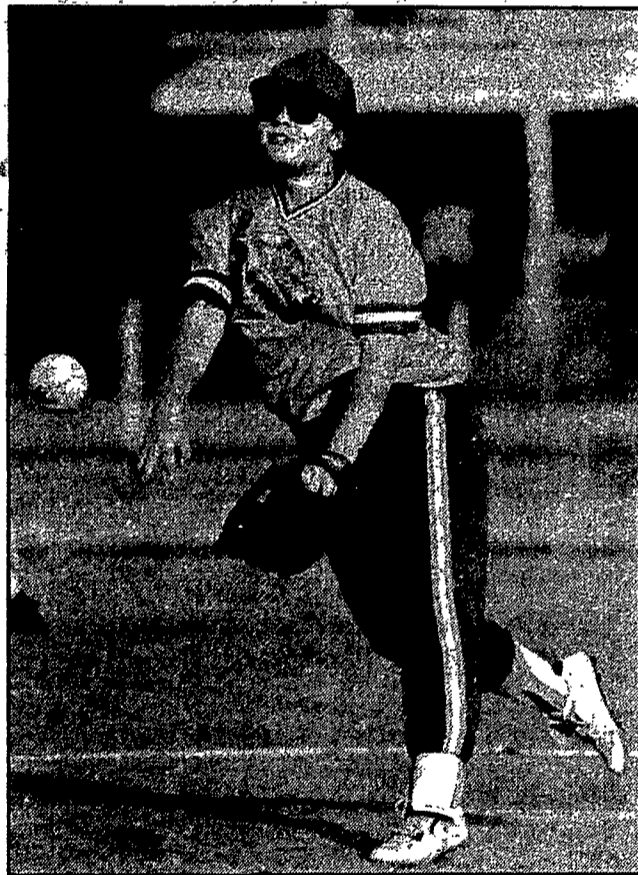
They have also come to this season with another mission: to



Becky Balsley slides safely into second base as the ball rolls away from Elba's Martha Cassidy during the Saints' 6-2 victory to clinch their first sectional softball title June 9, 1995.

beat South Seneca High, a team that went undefeated last year, winning the Class C sectional championship and the league title. South Seneca beat DeSales twice last season, but like true fighters, the Saints are eager to face their nemesis again. To get ready, the team has begun training for two hours after school, starting in the gym until the weather is drier and they can begin practicing on their new home field. Since many of the players have part-time jobs, the practice schedule is made on a week-to-week basis.

Often they end up practicing until 9 p.m., sliding, pitching and catching well after the sun has gone down. What becomes evi-



Melanie Chelenza's strong pitching performance helped the Saints to earn their sectional title against the Lancers last June.

dent is that a good number of the small school's girls are on the team, perhaps 20 in all. Despite this, DeSales has quite a well of talent to draw from, its coaches say.

"All nine starters can play pretty much any position," Randy Hagadorn said. "We have kids that can play four to five different positions, and that's really a big help. I can put anyone any place and not really lose anything."

He added that the summer softball team has done much for the veterans' skills.

"We try to get as many kids involved in that program as possible," he said. "It gets them used to the higher level of play they're going to see in high school or college."

In addition, he lauded the team's veterans as excellent athletes. He pointed to Chelenza as a driving force in the team's success, having only lost two games last year. Liberatore, he said, is the "fastest girl in the league. There's about nothing she can't do. The kids look up to her a lot (because of her athleticism)." At center field, he said, there's no one better or faster than senior Bridget Buckley. "She can really run down some plays," Hagadorn stated.

Speed is one of the team's greatest assets, coaches and players said. Former coach Harris recalled how Liberatore, in last year's sectionals, went from first to third base on a bunt, then was driven in to score.

"We created so many runs by getting a walk or stolen bases," Harris remembered.

However, Hagadorn said the team's attitude is what determined its success last season and will continue to do so this year. Besides being close-knit, the team has a winning attitude that it didn't have in previous seasons.

"When my brother and I first started (as assistants) there was a losing attitude," Hagadorn said. "We told them, you're not coming out just to show up. People used to laugh at DeSales. We said, when you kids are seniors, people aren't going to be laughing anymore."

Now that the team is taken more seriously by competitors, though, it has its work cut out. Catcher Krakowiak said the teams that overlooked hers last year won't make the same mistake. But she believes that the length of time the team has been together, coupled with its winning spirit, will allow it to reach its goals again this year.

"We all have to have the same goal, and everybody has to give 100 percent," she said.

"We have to work together, learn from our mistakes, and play up to our level," Buckley added.

"They've already been told it's going to be tough," Randy Hagadorn said. "We're a sectional team now, and people will play up to that. But we know how to win, and we have to maintain our attitude. We have a very talented group of kids. They're there to show that last year wasn't a fluke."

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