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ASHEBORO - For high school sports teams, being ranked is always something to be proud of. Whether it's ranked high within your conference, area, region, classification or state, being recognized as one of the best teams can certainly build confidence.

And for those few sports programs whose recognition comes at the national level, there's an extreme sense of pride mixed in with a little bit of cautiousness.

The Southwestern Randolph High School varsity softball team was recently ranked the 21st best team in the United States by Max Preps, which comes out with regional, state and national rankings for high school sports.

The Cougars are ranked first in North Carolina's West Region, first in the state and 21st in the nation. It's quite a recognition for a team that had such high expectations when the season began.

"It's something to be really proud of, but at the same time I have preached to these girls not to get caught up in all the rankings," SWR coach Chad Whitson said. "I am super proud of it and it is something they should be proud of. But you can't let that get into your head and you get complacent."



*Nationally ranked Cougars softball. Photo provided.*

The Cougars are a perfect 9-0, including 6-0 in Piedmont Athletic Conference play, heading into games later this week with non league foe Asheboro on Thursday and league member Trinity on Friday. SWR, which has outscored foes 61-7 so far this season, are 3-0 since the latest Max Preps poll was announced.

"I haven't seen a change in the way the girls have acted," Whitson said. "I really don't even know if they know how big this really is. As far

as my knowledge, I don't remember a team from around here that was nationally ranked. But we are still working hard. I have told all of them the importance of staying the course and staying focused."

The Cougars have already posted some very impressive wins. SWR opened the season with a thrilling 2-1 win over defending state champion West Stanly in nine innings and then topped Oak Grove 1-0 in 10 innings. Oak Grove is currently the No. 1 ranked 3-A team in the state. SWR also won over league powers Providence Grove and Eastern Randolph and earned a hard-fought 4-3 win over Uwharrie Charter Academy earlier this week.

"I really can't say enough about this group," Whitson said. "We are blessed with a lot of talent. We have a deep pitching staff and are blessed with young girls who will be here, for some, three more years. This group has a lot of energy and they feed off that energy and play with a lot of heart."