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ASHEBORO - Winning a state championship in baseball is a long process filled with peaks and valleys. And once a high school team has obtained that ultimate prize, there's no guarantee they will make a run the following season.

Unless the team involved, at least on paper, is Uwharrie Charter Academy, the defending 1-A state champions. This year, a quick look at the roster reveals a lot of very familiar names.

Although some schools are forced to rebuild after winning a title, mostly because it takes a solid group of upperclassmen to lead the way, the Eagles instead lost just four seniors - two starters - from last year's 22-10 team, which got hot at the right time.

Although it may not guarantee another deep run in the state playoffs, all the ingredients are in place for a very successful 2024 season.

"We had something to prove last year and we raised that bar," said UCA coach Rob Shore, who won a state title in his first year as head coach with the Eagles. "We understand we didn't have a target on our backs last year. We surprised people with what we did. When you have that label as state champion, even in our scrimmage they were posting they were going to play the defending state champions. We have to take it one game at a time, one practice at a time, one day at a time."

At least one UCA player understands that.

"We had that written on our board in our locker room," Shore said of being state champions. "We had that in there from November all the way to February 13. (The start of official practice for the new season.) Someone came in and erased it and put 0-0. One of the kids did that. They know it's a brand new year. What they did last year is something they can always hang their hat on, but it's a new year."

Things didn't start out well for Shore and the Eagles in 2023. UCA was 5-9 and still attempting to put together a successful product on the field. But once that formula was found, there was no turning back.

UCA finished second in the Piedmont Athletic Conference behind 2-A power Randleman. The Eagles lost to Trinity in the semifinals of the PAC Tournament before going on its playoff run that included wins over Queens Grant (12-0), Bishop McGuinness (10-4), North Stokes (11-4), Draughn (5-4 in eight innings) two over county rival Eastern Randolph for the regional



championship (4-3, 8-1) and then a sweep of North Moore (2-1, 8-1) for the state 1-A title in Holly Springs.

"We are not that same team as last year," Shore said. "Do I expect more out of this team? I do. We had so many underclassmen as starters last year. It's exciting that as good as we were last year, the pieces we have and the maturity we had over last year, we are sitting in a good position to make a run."

Those pieces include Grat Dalton, Troy Carver, Caleb Stickle, Carter Brown, Walker Wilkins, Jake Hunter, Logan Zephir and a strong pitching core led by Hunter (8-1, 0.66 ERA), Brett Smith (3-3, 1.33 ERA) and Logun Wilkins (3-2, 1-88).

Add to that the addition of East Davidson transfers Trey Kennedy and Alex Carver and the Eagles will have plenty of competition within its own team.

"They realize it doesn't matter if you were in the starting lineup last year, our room has become more full," Shore said. "I tell people all the time the greatest competition is not from who you are facing, but from the guy in front of you or the guy behind you. We have a lot more guys fighting for positions and it's going to be interesting to see who are the ones who are willing to fight."

Shore said he will also be counting on his group of seniors to show the way.

"We have five seniors and there's going to be pressure on those guys to lead by example," Shore said. "Every time we walk on the field, whether we win or lose, there is something we have to pull from it."

The Eagles open the season Friday night at The Burlington School before returning home Saturday against Central Davidson, with the jayvee game at 1 p.m. and the varsity game at 3:30 p.m.

"It's going to be fun to see how these guys come together," Shore said. "It's a different team and a different atmosphere. The kids expect to win."