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Last season, the Piedmont Athletic Conference had three of the top 2-A softball teams in the entire state. With Eastern Randolph, Randleman and Providence Grove all featuring dynamic hurlers and only two teams qualifying for the state playoffs due to a reduced field because of the pandemic, a very talented team was going to be excluded.

Providence Grove, despite a 10-4 record, was that team. Because of four tough losses, three of the one-run variety, the Patriots were left out of the playoffs. They have used that for fuel this season and that fuel has lit an early-season fire.

Led by the stellar pitching of Emma Mazzarone, an incredible offensive output led by Makayla McClain, Mazzarone, Edi Austin, Gracie Smith and others, the Patriots are a perfect 8-0, including a 3-0 mark in the PAC. The Patriots, who are the only unbeaten team in league play, have outscored their opponents 80-3 with Mazzarone having already recorded five shutouts and three no-hitters.



*2022 Providence Grove Patriots. Photo provided.*



*PGHS freshman Mailey Way. Photo provided.*

"We definitely have used it as motivation," said PG head coach Tim Brown of missing the playoffs last year. "Our goal is to make it every year and last year was the first time in five or six years we didn't make it. We knew going in there were three great pitchers and someone very good was going to stay home. Unfortunately, it was us."

With the NCHSAA playoffs once again back to normal, the Patriots shouldn't have a problem this year. They already own a league win over new conference member and softball power Southwestern Randolph, which owns a PAC win over Eastern Randolph. Only the conference champion earns an automatic bid although there are

plenty of at-large bids available should things not go as planned.

"We play ER and that's always a battle and Randleman produces great talent," Brown said. "Whoever wins this Randolph County league is going to earn it. Randolph County is a great county for softball."

Helping the PG cause is an offense that features McClain, a veteran who is off to another incredible start. She was named the South Region player of the week by Max Preps after the first week of the season and she hasn't cooled down. She was hitting .667 with 18 RBIs through the first seven games.

"She is the most talented player I have ever coached," Brown said. "She can play anywhere. Last year, we had to play her at catcher and she was great back there. She is just phenomenal."

Mazzarone is hitting .636 with three home runs and Austin is at .500. Smith is hitting .421 and freshman Mailey Way is hitting .368.

The Patriots provide more than enough offense for any pitcher, but with Mazzarone on the mound, very little offense is needed. Mazzarone is 8-0 with a 0.15 ERA. She has given up one earned run in 44 innings and has fanned 104.

"Emma has come back 100 percent better than last year," Brown said. She has cut down on her pitches. She is going to keep you in every game."

Great pitching and a great offense. Two key ingredients to having a special season.



*Seniors Edi Austin (#4) and Makayla McClain (#17) confer with pitcher Emma Mazzarone. Photo provided.*



*Patriot junior Emma Mazzarone. Photo provided.*