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By Dennis Garcia  
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ASHEBORO - When Toby Strider was elevated from assistant coach to head coach of the Southwestern Randolph High School softball team for this season, he said he realized he had the pieces for another impressive campaign.

And he had a very good idea just exactly where those pieces would fit to assure another successful season. But an injury to Caressa King, a three-year starter in the outfield who was expected to take over at shortstop, meant adjustments all over the field. Although players may not be playing in the position Strider first thought they would be in, everyone seems to have made those adjustments quite well.

Entering Spring Break, the Cougars are a perfect 7-0 in Piedmont Athletic Conference play and 7-2 overall. As expected, they have received stellar pitching, the defense has been spectacular and the Cougars are hitting a robust .365 as a team with a 75-14 run differential so far this season. Statistics that are adding up to a very special season.

"First, it's an honor to be in that position because it's a historic program which has been successful as long as it's been here," Strider said of taking over the program.

"Expectations are to win and produce every time you're on the field."

The Cougars have used the same formula for years to be one of the dominant teams in the area. Hard work, an emphasis on fundamentals and realizing quickly that every player is important and has a role to fill has given the Cougars an edge over most opponents.

"The harder you work, the luckier you get," Strider said.

"Your work ethic has to exceed expectations. That starts when no one is watching you."

The Cougars have obviously put in the work. Led by the pitching of junior Macie Crutchfield, who is 5-0 with a 0.39



*Southwestern Randolph softball coach Toby Strider. Photo provided.*



*Junior pitcher Macie Crutchfield.*

ERA and 52 strikeouts in 32 innings, and a stout defense, scoring against the Cougars has been tough. In only two games has the opponent scored more than two runs and SWR has recorded three shutouts, including a 16-0 win over Trinity in its last game before the break.

"The thing about Macie is that she hits her spots, she rarely misses," Strider said. "And our defense has been so good behind her."



*Sophomore Alyssa Harris.*

Crutchfield isn't the only hurler Strider can depend on. The Cougars are loaded with arms as Alyssa Harris, Micah Wilson and Chloe Eudy have all shown shutdown ability in the circle.

Those hurlers are benefiting from a defense that includes Hayleigh Thompson at first, Lillian Payne at second, Harris at shortstop, Kami Dunn at third and an outfield consisting of Nauttica Parrish in left, Madelyn Smith in center and Wilson in right. Maddie Strider is the quarterback of the team, handling the catching duties.

Other players have done a good job of stepping in where needed, whether it be as a pinch-hitter, pinch-runner or providing encouragement.

Offensively, Dunn is hitting .440 with seven RBIs, Thompson is at .407 with six RBIs, Smith is hitting .400 with 10 runs and seven RBIs, Crutchfield is at .400 with six RBIs, Harris is

hitting .370 with 11 runs scored and six RBIs and Payne, Strider, Wilson and Parrish are all well over .300. Strider is second on the team with nine RBIs and Harris has the only home run so far.

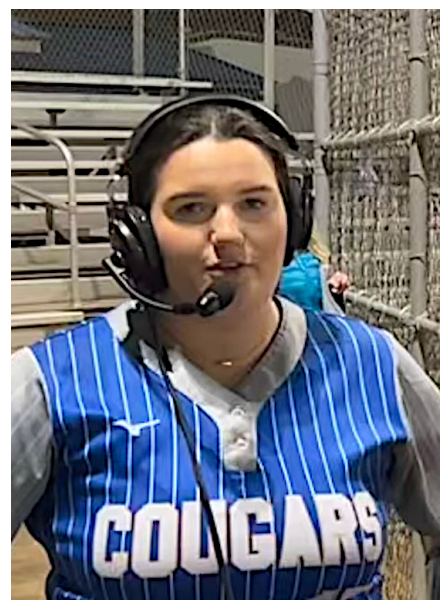
All this from a team that lost its one-through-four hitters from a year ago.

"That's the thing that has been a pleasant surprise," Strider said of his offense, which relies heavily on the run game.

"Different nights, it's a different player. This isn't a team where you can say once you get past the number five hitter you can cruise past the next four hitters. Small ball and stealing bases have been huge for us."

SWR has already recorded 44 stolen bases with Smith tallying 13 and Parrish eight. Ten players have at least one stolen base.

"The one thing I want us to do is peak come playoff time," Strider said. "I think everyone is settling into their roles. The dugout has a lot of enthusiasm and that is important. They



*Cougar senior Hayleigh Thompson.*

care about one another. I remember a game where I almost was steamrolled because the dugout came out so fast to give them high-fives."

The Cougars have a tough week when play resumes as they will battle Providence Grove, West Stanly and Randleman. But having proved they can already win close games - a 5-1 extra-inning win over Eastern Randolph and a 2-1 thriller over Uwharrie Charter Academy - the Cougars are certainly primed for the stretch run.