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RANDLEMAN - Team first. Whatever happens, the team comes first. The Randleman High School varsity softball team is stressing that one philosophy this season.

"Our number one rule is take care of the team," interim head coach Josh Ashby said. "The chemistry of this team is not by mistake. They have all bought in and have the same common goal. If you don't buy into that goal, you won't last on this team. We protect the team at all costs."

That means a lot of different things. Being ready at practice and working hard, never searching for the easy way out. Being prepared for every pitch of every inning of every game. Accepting roles. Always being prepared for when your name is called. Being together off the field as well as on. Even watching carefully how each player uses social media. In essence, being a good teammate and a good human being.

"It's all about the team, there's 18 girls on this team and everyone plays a role," said senior infielder Kadie Green. "Knowing that role you have to play and knowing your time will come. Knowing you have to contribute in whatever your role is."

It's a philosophy that has worked very well for this talented Tigers team. Heading into a brutal week that includes non-league games with Western Alamance, Southwestern Randolph and Reagan, the Tigers are 10-1, including a perfect 5-0 in the Piedmont Athletic Conference.

The only setback came in the second game of the season, a 4-3 loss to West Forsyth, which is 9-2. Even more impressive, the Tigers have outscored their opponents 122-9 during the first 11 games of the season.

"All us girls knew how much potential we had after last year," junior pitcher Kinzie Ivey said of last year's 20-7 record with a trip to the regional finals. "It's kind of like last year never ended. We never stopped working. It just feels that everyone is locked in."

The RHS roster is loaded from top to bottom. The Tigers are deep at every position with seven of the 18 players being underclassmen. Still, the leadership of seniors Natalie Roach, Kaylie St. John, Makayla Striblin, Lyric Chriscoe and Green have been paramount with juniors Addyson Dees, Teanna Bostick, Kaylee Phillips, Elsie Prince and Ivey providing impressive play as well.



Tigers interim head coach Josh Ashby.



Junior Kinzie Ivey.

"Everyone knows we have a really good roster and they won't always be a starter in our lineup," Ivey said. "They know what they have to do for this team to succeed."

Ivey has continued her impressive career in the circle.

"I keep going back to the old tee-ball teams when she wouldn't even speak to me," Ashby said of Ivey, who, like a number of other girls on this team, Ashby has coached since they were little. "We always knew she was athletic and had the ability. She doesn't like to lose. She is an absolute competitor. She knows she has a solid defense behind her. She is a fierce competitor and losing is not an option. Her mental toughness this year has been

incredible."

Her teammates have noticed this as well.

"She's so much fun playing behind," Green said. "She brings so much emotion and brings so much heart to the game. Sometimes we have to let her know we are here for her."

Ivey said she's received that message loud and clear.

"This year I feel way more secure," she said of being in the circle. "If they hit the ball, I know I have players behind me and they will always pick me up. My freshman year, I felt I had to be perfect all the time. This year, I don't care if they hit the ball because the girls will have me. The ball ain't getting dropped."

Ivey has been in the circle for most of the innings with Dees providing solid hurling as well. The Tigers' pitching staff and defense have combined to record seven shutouts and two games in which they allowed just one run.

This week's opponents will certainly be a challenge.

"(Tough non-league games) are very important because without it when the state playoffs come, we won't be ready," Ivey said. "We've talked about winning a state championship, but we're playing it one game at a time. There's always a bigger picture to what we have to do."

The Tigers have also had to face some adversity. Longtime head coach Jeff Webster was replaced by Ashby just a couple of games into the season because of some personal matters. The team hasn't skipped a beat.

"They have one mission, they are here to play softball," Ashby said. "Nothing has changed. Nothing changes, Same goal. Same mission. Our coaching staff is just as all-in as the players are."



Senior Kadie Green.

Of course, Ashby's role has changed as well.

"A lot different, yea," he said. "You go from hiding in the shadows, keeping the field up, assisting any way possible to having to make those tough decisions. We have 18 girls and they can all play. For me, it's been tough, but it hasn't.

"There's still certainly high expectations, but our whole thing this year is to take it one game at a time and be playing our best softball at the end of the season," Ashby continued. "We don't put too much pressure on the regular season. They have all worked hard and are prepared" The depth has paid off.

"The one thing that stands out for me is that it's tough not to be a starter, but when called upon, the players on the bench are ready and taking it seriously," Ashby said. "To sit beside them and have a front row seat. It's a dream come true for the school, the community, to have this kind of arsenal."

What an arsenal it is.