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LIBERTY - American Legion baseball can be grueling. But the benefits gained by playing in such an established program are many for those who elect to participate. With so many options available to players, dedication to the Legion program has sometimes been a problem for Liberty Post 81.

But that shouldn't be a problem this year as coach Nate Cockman said he's received solid commitments from a number of players who in the past few seasons have played not only American Legion baseball but at the same time other programs as well. Legion was often a second choice for those players, but not any more.

"The past two or three years, it's been really tough because of other options for baseball," Cockman said. "The very first meeting I stressed that American Legion had to be the top priority and a big majority of guys agreed with that and they are now on board."

Last season, after a first-round playoff series win over Hamlet, Liberty forced a third and deciding game with Rowan County in the second round. But in that win-or-go-home battle, Liberty had just nine players, with three of those Junior Legion players who were brought up just so Liberty could field a team.

"I think we've turned the corner in terms of numbers," Cockman said as Liberty is scheduled to open the season Sunday at Chatham County before a road game Tuesday at Mocksville. "Legion has to be a top priority. I have been transparent and up front with them and they have been transparent with me."

Liberty Post 81, which finished 10-14 overall a season ago, will once again compete in the Northern Division of Area III. Other division opponents include Randolph County Post 45, Aberdeen Post 82, Chatham County Post 305, Davidson County Post 8 (Hawgs), Hamlet Post 49, High Point-Thomasville Post 87 and Moore County Post 12.

"The numbers have been really good and that's encouraging at the start of the summer," Cockman said. "We have a lot of (Eastern Randolph) guys coming back, guys who have quality arms. Successful Legion programs are the ones who have the most guys at the end."



Eastern Randolph High School enjoyed a solid year under Cockman, and Liberty Post 81 has a definite Wildcats look to them. Bryson Marley, Cade McCallum and Chance Holdaway have all committed to Post 81 and will provide solid pitching and play in the field.

"It's going to be a benefit to be able to set a starting rotation," Cockman said.

ER's Maddux Dunn and Faith Christian's Mason Taylor, another prominent arm, returns. ER's Avery Wright, Carlos Cordero, Miles Cox, Landon Albright and Levi Stalker will also be on the roster as will Eastern Alamance's John Wittig, a first baseman who will be going to Rockingham Community College to play baseball in the fall, and Tyler Westbrook, who will be playing at Lenoir Community College.

Providence Grove High School's Chase Collins, Grant Underwood, Bryson Arrington and Aiden Armfield will also be counted on.

Faith Christian's Carter Mustain and Hayden Robbins and Montgomery Central's Josh Nelson will also see time.

"I feel better about our commitment, better about the passion they have for not only Legion baseball but baseball," Cockman said. "Some have worked their way through the Junior Legion program and we have a core group who know what this is about." Cockman will be assisted by Jordan Cassell and Ryan Aaron.

"We have a lot of guys who play a lot of positions, which is obviously good," Cockman said, "We don't have many one-position guys. It's going to be one of those teams who are scrappy, they put the ball in play. "I'm excited."