



Outlook

The Seminoles will look to take the next step in 2002. After reaching an NCAA regional final for the second year in a row, Florida State is poised to make another run at the program's sixth College World Series. Head coach Dr. JoAnne Graf, who is just 12 wins shy of becoming the all-time winningest coach in Division I softball history, will need to replace five starters off a squad that posted a 58-12 record, which was the seventh-best winning percentage in the nation last year.

"We always have the same goal and that is to win the National Championship," said Graf. "Last season we didn't always rise to the occasion especially at the ACC Tournament. Our kids will be hungry to get back the ACC Title we lost last year. The same thing goes for the College World Series. It gets tougher every year but we came very close last season. We made it to the regional final two years in a row now and hopefully they will just go after that goal again this year. We have accomplished some great things but we just need to take that extra step."

Florida State used its fall schedule in an effort to find replacements for All-American's Serita Brooks and Staci Brandon, the country's sixth-best pitcher according to ERA and a first team All-Southeast selection in Jen White-Stokes and first team All-Southeast region first baseman Robyn Gauger.

This will be the first season since 1995 that Florida State will not be competing for an automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament in either the Metro Conference/ACC Alliance or the South Atlantic Softball Alliance (SASA). If the Seminoles want to make their 15th NCAA appearance, they will need to gain an at-large invitation from the NCAA. With NC State scheduled to add softball in 2003, the ACC will finally have enough softball schools to qualify for an automatic bid from the conference next year.

Just in case the NCAA selection committee thinks about overlooking the Seminoles in 2002, Graf scheduled one of the program's most difficult regular season slates in memory. With 13 games against teams who qualified for the 2001 NCAA Tournament on the schedule and the possibility of facing even more in either the FSU Invitational or Kia Classic, FSU will have its hands full all season long.



"I don't think the loss of a possible SASA bid is going to hurt us and it gave us an even better reason to strengthen our schedule this year, which we have done," said Graf. "Last year we had the nation's sixth toughest schedule and this year it should be even tougher. We will probably lose more games this year than we did last season due to our schedule strength but I think we will be an even stronger team at the end of the season. Hopefully it will help us take that one little step further, which would land us in the College World Series."

PITCHING STAFF

Despite the loss of White-Stokes from the nation's No. 1 pitching staff in 2001, Florida State should be in good position to continue right where it left off. Reigning ACC Player of the Year **Leslie Malerich**, an Easton second team All-American and third-team NFCA/Louisville Slugger All-American in 2001, returns to anchor the staff. The senior posted the tenth-best ERA in the nation last year (0.72) and ranked 26th in the nation with 26 wins.

"I think this year's staff will be a very good group," said Graf. "We lost a senior leader in Jen White-Stokes but All-American Leslie Malerich is returning for her senior year. She is one of the best pitchers in the country who I feel is being overlooked by the Olympic committee. She is exceptional and will keep us in every game she pitches. We are going to count on her a lot this year. It is her last season and we will count on her for senior leadership. She has been in big games and can handle any type of pressure situation that we face."

Malerich will be joined by ACC Rookie of the Year **Jessica van der Linden** and highly recruited freshman **Casey Hunter** in the Seminole rotation. Van der Linden, whose 0.84 ERA would have placed her 16th in the nation had she pitched approximately 10 more innings, had a breakout freshman campaign for FSU going 13-3 including three no-hitters. Hunter, considered one of Illinois' top high school pitchers, won't be asked to fill White-Stokes' shoes but will fill the role that ACC Rookie of the Year van der Linden excelled in during the 2001 campaign.

"Jessica van der Linden will be more mature this season after completing her first season of Division I ball," added Graf. "She will improve rapidly this year and will be getting the ball more than she did last season. We look for her to become stronger and more consistent throughout the entire ballgame. She knows most of the hitters she is going to face now and that will make her a better pitcher."

"Casey Hunter will be the rookie of the staff. She will have time to work herself into the rotation and slowly develop into a top Division I pitcher. We have to use this year to get her ready for next season when Leslie graduates. We want to make sure she is ready."





SOFTBALL FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY



Graf feels her two returning pitchers have gained another year of experience and should be even better in 2002. Although they will miss White-Stokes, this staff should be very strong again. With such a strong schedule, the pitching staff is going to have to be even better and Graf thinks they are ready.

CATCHERS

Florida State remains very strong behind the plate returning all three catchers from last season's team. Senior co-captain **Kimmy Carter** has started 173 straight games and is expected to have a big impact handling the pitching staff and at the plate. When Carter moves to the outfield, standout sophomore **Elisa Velasco** will take over duties behind the plate. The Hesperia, CA native showed surprising maturity at the plate in 2001 and gained valuable experience calling games in her 17 starts at catcher. Sophomore **Julie Jordan** is continuing to recover from back problems that sidelined her for all but 17 games last year and will also contribute if her back continues to progress well.

"It is critical to have experience behind the plate because they know how to work with the pitchers," said Graf. "Kimmy Carter has worked with Leslie (Malerich) for a while and E (Elisa Velasco) got a lot of experience and work as a freshman. Julie Jordan is still a little tentative with her back but that looks to have healed very well but she didn't get as much experience as we would have liked last season. She got the feel of Division I softball at the beginning of the season though. I think all three of those kids will be able to handle the pitchers and we will work with them to call the best game that they can based on each pitchers abilities."

INFIELD

Florida State lost three everyday starters in the infield and return only All-American **Brandi Stuart** at second base. Filling the void left by All-Southeast Region first baseman Robyn Gauger, shortstop and two-year starter Natalie Bennett and 2000 All-American Staci Brandon at third will be one of the team's major challenges in 2002. Graf will rely on two freshmen and a redshirt sophomore to replace the 137 hits, 23 doubles, 69 RBIs and .962 fielding percentage that this group of seniors accounted for in 2001.

"The infield will be our most inexperienced area but I think there is a lot of talent there," said Graf. "**Beth Wade** has been around a while at first base and the more she plays the better she will get. In her case, it will just be a matter of getting her on the field and she will get that opportunity this season.

"We have Brandi Stuart at second base and she had an exceptional season last year. She is one of our emotional leaders in the infield and she will definitely have to be the experienced leader there too. **Skyla Cox** will back up Brandi at second. She got some experience last year and she has really improved and brings great enthusiasm for the game."

Two highly recruited freshmen will make up the left side of the Seminole infield with **Tatiana George** getting the start at short and **Bryttani Lindheim** replacing Brandon at third. George is still learning the intricacies of the position after playing mostly second base recently. Lindheim will be asked to combine Brandon's production at the plate while meeting the level of defensive play senior **Becky Brock** brings to the table. Backing Lindheim up will be seniors Brock and **Jackie Hirschfeld**. Brock is very strong defensively while Hirschfeld is a great hitter. Between the three players, the coaching staff feels they have a great compliment at third. Newcomer **Robyn Larson** can play any infield position and is a very solid player who the coaches have full confidence in.

"Freshman Tatiana George will start at shortstop," said Graf. "She is still finessing the position and relearning some things due to the fact that she played second base most recently. She has a lot of ability and is a very smooth player. She will learn a lot this year and she never makes the same mistake twice. She will get better each game and that will be great for us. Bryttani Lindheim will be our starter at third mainly due to the strength of her bat. She is still learning the position defensively so we have a lot of meshing to do in the infield.

"We will start the process of getting this infield in sync during practice but the fine tuning will have to come by playing together in games. Trial by fire in game situations is different than what you can do in practice so I am looking forward to that process. They are a very athletic infield and very smart. They don't make the same mistake twice so that will be a big key."

OUTFIELD

Next to pitching, this might be the strongest position for Florida State in 2002. The Seminoles return their top power hitter in **Monique Marier** who started 56 games in left field and should see the majority of action there again in 2002. Jessica van der Linden and Kimmy Carter will rotate in right when they aren't pitching or catching, respectively. Newcomer **Shundra Colzie** will take over center field duties due to the graduation of All-American Serita Brooks.





"We have a lot of talent returning in the outfield and added some very strong newcomers," said Graf. "Monique Marier will return in left field. She is a solid player who continues to improve defensively and is getting more aggressive. She has the strongest arm out there by far; it is just a rocket. Colzie will start in center field. She is a very strong player and a raw talent. She needs to gain experience at this level but she works so hard at practice and is really looking forward to the spring. It will be tough for her to replace All-American Serita Brooks but she is a different type of player than Serita was."

"Kimmy Carter will be playing right field when she isn't catching so we have some depth in the outfield. Jessica van der Linden will provide depth in left or right field and she can really play anywhere. When she isn't pitching, she will be in the outfield."

Florida State has a ton of depth in the outfield with **Shandra Colzie**, Skyla Cox and **Leah Armstrong** all capable of filling in whenever needed. Shandra Colzie, Shaundra's twin sister, will get a lot of playing time in both left and right. She is very solid and came from a great junior college program at Santa Fe. According to coach Graf, Shandra is an enthusiastic player who is fast and brings great speed to the game. She will be able to do a lot of good things in the outfield as she adjusts to the Division I game and eliminates some of her mistakes.

"Skyla Cox has worked in the outfield along with Leah Armstrong," said Graf. "She (Armstrong) is still working hard on her hitting but isn't quite where we need her to be right now. She will come in off the bench to relieve Shundra and we will also utilize her speed on the bases along with Skyla."

"We have a lot of options in the outfield which could make it hard on the coaching staff but it is a nice problem to have. We are solid depth wise and I feel good we can handle any situation."

ON THE BASES

Replacing NCAA record-holder Serita Brooks on the base paths will be one of the major challenges for the coaching staff. Brooks, who holds the NCAA record for consecutive successful stolen bases (54), stolen bases in a NCAA Tournament game (5) and steals in a single game (5), was a key weapon in FSU's attack for two seasons. According to Graf, you can never replace a player like Brooks but you just have to find a way to compensate for her loss.

"I think we have overall team speed but may lack the burner role that Serita filled for us," said Graf. "We have a lot of speed and more on the bench than we've had in a few years. We have so many options in the sense of working into our offense and even more than we've had in the past. We will miss Serita getting on base but I think we will have more consistency this season compared to last year."

AT THE PLATE

Last season's squad was one of FSU's best at the plate with six starters batting over .300 and they posted a team batting average of .297. The team set a record with 93 doubles in 2002, shattering the previous mark of 71 set in 1999, and they raised the squad's batting average 28 percentage points from the previous season.

"We have improved in this area," said Graf. "Our bench will also allow us to find some hitting if anyone does struggle at the plate. Monique and Elisa will be better hitters this year and Brandi was an excellent hitter last season. Tatiana is a strong hitter as well as Bryttani, so we may be improved at certain positions offensively. We will miss Robyn Gauger's power but if we can hit consistently, that will help us score more runs."

SENIOR LEADERSHIP

According to Graf, the biggest thing the team needs from this group of five seniors is their leadership. Between Carter, Marier, Brock, Hirschfeld and Malerich, this senior class has appeared in 559 games and made 430 starts. They have won two ACC Titles in three seasons and have gone to back-to-back NCAA Regional finals.

"We have to have that (leadership)," said Graf. "They know what it takes to win a championship and to win big games. They know the importance of team cohesion and the importance of setting a good example. The seniors are the ones the players look up to. Positive leadership from them, especially during the tough stretches, will be very important."

"From what I saw in the fall, I have high expectations for this team," said Graf. "Last year's team was one of the best team's I've ever had as far as supporting one another. They were a very cohesive group and I think that is one reason we did as well as we did. We didn't really have any ups and downs or turmoil. The players worked hard together while being supportive and that is a big key. If we can replicate that, we will be in good shape."

