

FORECAST

Volume 23 Issue 3

Spring 2022

KEYSTONE WILDCATS:

2021 OHSA Div. II State Softball Champions



Keystone celebrates after the win over Wooster Triway for the Div. II State Softball Title!



Also inside: High School Baseball and Softball previews PLUS, Lake Erie Crushers and Cleveland Guardians Previews



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FORECAST

2022 Spring Preview

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WEOL FORECAST MAGAZINE SPRING 2022 PREVIEW

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Volume 23 Issue 3

Editor
Rocco Nuosci

Feature Writers
Andy Barch
Todd Shapiro

Cover Design
Chronicle-Telegram

Publisher
Source3Media



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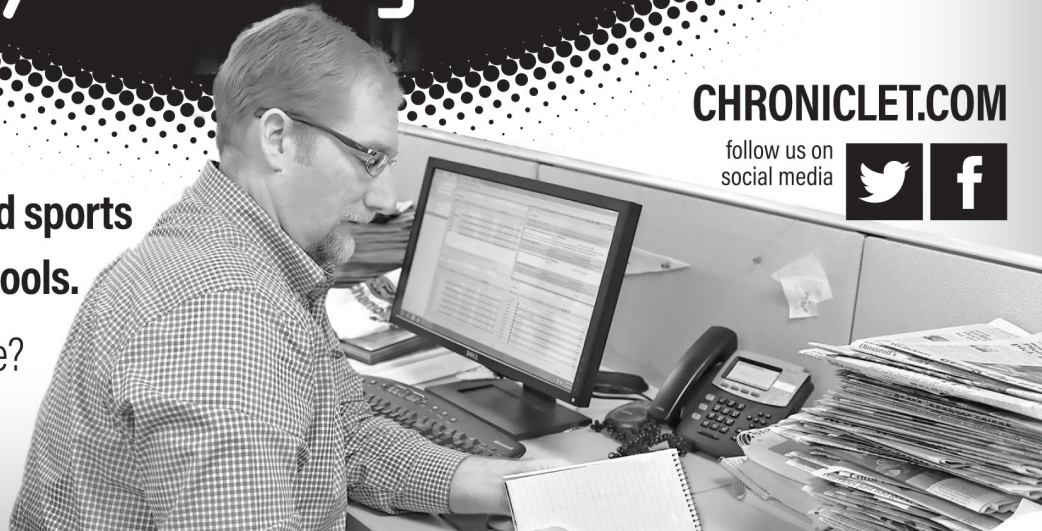
SPORTS

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2022 Lorain County High School Softball Preview



ANNA NORRIS | CHRONICLE TELEGRAM

Senior Larren Rounds from Firelands takes a big cut at a pitch.

By Todd Shapiro

Anybody who saw a high school softball game in Lorain County in 2021 would have been hard-pressed to remember that it was just a year prior the season was lost due to the pandemic and the girls never had a chance to take the field.

Area team picked up where they had left off in 2019 with record-breaking performances, deep postseason runs, and with

the season ending like so many had before, with a local team, the **Keystone Wildcats**, hoisting the Division II state championship trophy high into the sky on a starry Sunday night at Akron's Firestone Stadium.

Coach Jim Piazza led the Wildcats to a fifth state title, defeating Wooster Triway 7-3, in the championship game. Keystone, which finished the season with a 33-1 record was ranked No. 9 in the nation in

the USA Today/NFCA poll.

During the 2021 season, Keystone became the first softball program in Ohio to win 1,000 games and Piazza became the latest Lorain County coach to join the exclusive 500-win club.

Then in late August, the bombshell news struck that Piazza would be leaving Keystone after 19 years to take over the athletic

See **SOFTBALL**, 4



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SOFTBALL

From 3

director position at Elyria Catholic, where he will also be the co-softball coach.

However, new Keystone coach Doug Cooper, who was an assistant on last year's team, kept most of the Wildcats coaching staff intact and returns a wealth of talent as the team looks to make its 20th trip to the state tournament this spring.

Keystone will be led by senior pitch Lily Cassell. Cassell, a high school all-American in 2021, was in the pitcher's circle in the state championship game capping off her season with a 30-1 record, eight shutouts and 255 strikeouts in 176 2/3 innings pitched.

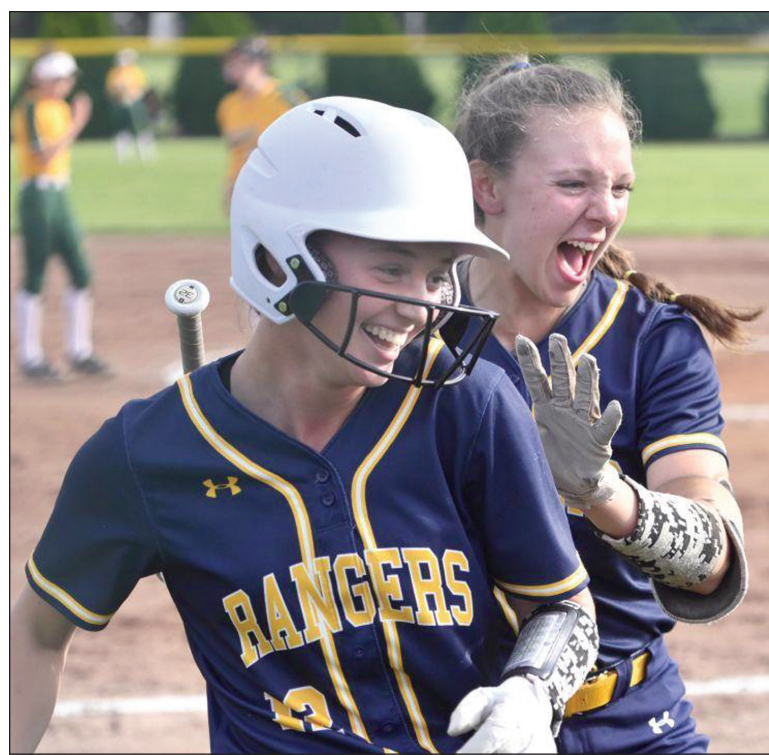
The Wildcats also return four starters who batted over .400 last season — senior Kennedy

Kerr, juniors Delaney Peters and Dana Pace, and sophomore Jayln Owca.

Lorain County had four district championship teams last spring, with Amherst, North Ridgeville, and Brookside joining the Wildcats. Three of those teams have new coaches this season.

Longtime assistant Amy McMillan takes over for Mike Mease at **North Ridgeville** and brings with her a wealth of talent from last year's regional runner-up team.

The Rangers, who were 23-5 and Southwestern Conference co-champions last season, return their top two pitchers, junior Autumn Behlke, a Youngstown State commit, who was 13-3 last season, and Katie Barnhart, who is headed to Ohio Dominican University, who was 11-2. Both pitchers had earned run averages in the



DAVID RICHARD | CHRONICLE TELEGRAM

North Ridgeville's Daylan Baker and Katie Barnhart celebrate a home run.

low 2's.

The Rangers return a total of nine starters from last season, six of which — Barnhart, Daylan Baker, Jenna Jaffe (a Walsh commit), Emily Lime, Abby Viancourt, and Leah Vandrasiak — are seniors.

Brookside is defending its first district championship since 1982 with new coach Scott Nader at the helm. The Cardinals return the majority of its lineup from last year's 18-9 team including pitchers Leah Musall (9-5) and Lindsey Nader (4-1). Nader was also the Cardinals leading hitter with a .618 average while junior shortstop Faye Clark provided the power with seven home runs and 46 RBIs. Clark and juniors Lexi Bartlome and Haley Trowbridge all hit over .400 last season.

Amherst set a school record with 26 wins and won a share of the SWC title before falling to North Ridgeville in the regional semifinals.

The Comets are led by senior centerfielder Cassidy Kettleman, an Indiana University commit, who hit for a .637 average last year with 65 hits, 54 runs, and 50 RBIs setting a school record in all four categories.

Among the Comets' other key

returnees are senior left fielder Rachel Miller, an Otterbein commit, who batted .305 with six home runs last year, and seniors Brianna Sadler and junior Lacie Stottlemire who hit .531 and .402 respectively.

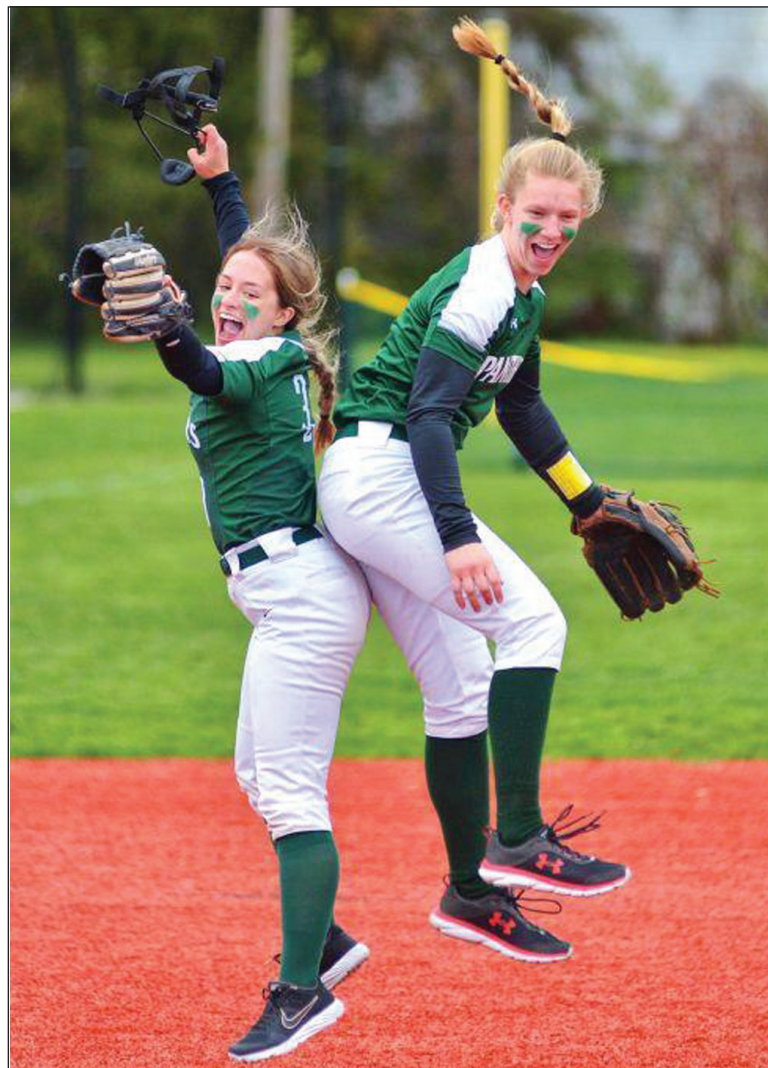
Elyria, which is beginning its first year in the SWC, will be looking to assert itself among the league's elite teams. The Pioneers are coming off of their first losing season since 1990 but second-year coach Megan Bashak brings back seven returning letterwinners, including seniors Mya St. Peter and Jaidah Gonzalez.

Avon also enters the 2022 season with high expectations. Veteran coach Ken Matuszak returns nine letter winners, including Toledo commit Emma Ody, who batted .483 last season while playing every inning at catcher, and pitcher Kayla Dykin, a Findlay commit, who was 9-3 in the pitcher's circle with a 1.86 ERA while also posting a .413 average.

The Eagles return infielder Elaina Rodriguez, who will play her college ball at John Carroll, and outfielder Liz Berki, who hit five home runs and drove in 31 runs last season.

Avon Lake is hoping expe-

See **SOFTBALL**, 5



THOMAS FETCENKO | CHRONICLE TELEGRAM

Elyria Catholic's Grace Belza and Annika Bredel. Bredel hit a Lorain County record 17 HR's in 2021.

SOFTBALL

From 4

rience at the most important positions on the field will lead to success in 2022. The Shoregals return seven letter winners including senior catcher Kaylee Kuwalu, who batted .395 last season, and sophomore pitchers Avery Orille and Lindsay Revmatas, who combined for nearly 200 strikeouts last season.

There will be a new face in the dugout at **Midview** this season as 2016 Middies grad Cassie Haight takes over for Mike Ives who coached the team for 16 years before retiring after the 2021 season.

Keystone's biggest competition in the Lorain County League should come from **Wellington**. The Dukes, coming off of a 23-5 season, have six seniors that were a part of their 2019 district championship team led by catcher Teddi Hardoby, who was named first-team all-Ohio in 2021 after batting .500 with nine doubles, seven triples, three home runs, and 24 RBIs.

Seniors Maile Oswald, Mikayla Paramore, Madison Lewis, and Jenna Pasadyn all hit over .300 for Wellington last season.

Black River returns six starters from its team that went

16-10 in 2021. The Pirates return three seniors — Abbie Graves, Emma Stief, and Mandy Hopkins — plus sophomore pitcher Jordan Bradford who earned second-team all-LCL honors her freshman year.

Oberlin is coming off of a disappointing 2021 season, but coach Josie Martin bring back a more experienced team this spring with seniors Emerson Freas, Emily Emerich, and Mariah Thompson. As soon as the Phoenix can build depth at pitcher the wins will start to come for Oberlin which is still looking for its first LCL win.

Clearview will have a young team this season but the Clippers will have offensive firepower thanks to senior Madison Pennington, who batted .381 with three home runs and 23 RBIs last year, and Jarimar Ruiz, a junior, who batted .373 with 22 stolen bases.

Columbia returns seniors Jessi Morlock and Caitlin Wilkins, who batted .473 and .367 respectively last year, but Raiders coach Ken Lugo will also be relying on an influx of talent from a strong freshman class.

Firelands has a new coach as Collin Pecoraro takes over for Judy Dostall, luckily for the Falcons they can rely on the leadership of senior catcher Larren Rounds, who is headed to the University of Toledo to play



KRISTIN BAUER | CHRONICLE TELEGRAM

Keystone's Lily Cassell, one of the nation's top arms, gets set to deliver a pitch.

softball next spring.

Things are looking up for **Elyria Catholic**. Piazza will be joining second-year coach Terrell Dixon in the dugout and senior Annika Bredel will likely be smashing home runs out of parks all over the Great Lakes Conference. Bredel set the Lorain County record for home runs in a season in 2021 with 17. Her 70 RBIs were a county record and tied for fifth all-time in Ohio. Bredel's .758 batting average also put her in the top-10 for all-time single-season performances in Ohio.

Behind Bredel, the Panthers will be a young team that will be counting on juniors Grace Belza, Gia Manley, and Natalie Saddler to come through with a big season.

Out at **Vermilion** second-year coach Tony Larizza heads into a tough Sandusky Bay Conference with only two returning letter winners, senior center-fielder Haley Larizza and junior catcher Lillie Mealey, both of whom earned all-county honors last season.

After not fielding a team since 2019 Open Door is hoping to rebuild its program under

coach Lori Jameyson.

Lorain coach Pam Jackson will have a young team this year, but she should have them ready to compete in the Lake Erie League.

One of the best parts of softball season is the tournaments. Three local teams, Elyria, Amherst, and Keystone will be traveling to Ashland April 14-16 to compete in the Wendy's Spring Classic. The Wildcats and Comets each went 3-0 in the pool at the event in 2021.

On April 29 the Prebis Memorial Classic will return to LaGrange Community Park and Wellington Community Park. The event which annually showcases the top teams in Ohio will have 10 Lorain County teams competing over the two-day event.

Over the past decade, Lorain County has produced Division I softball talent at an amazing rate so the girls you watch playing at your local ballpark this spring could be the same ones you're following on ESPN in the coming years.



Wellington's Teddi Hardoby was named first-team All-Ohio in 2021.

2022 Lorain County High School Baseball Preview

By Todd Shapiro

The 2021 high school baseball season began with players adjusting to new normals, returning to the field after missing 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Eventually, cold, snowy early spring days gave way to warm summer nights and gentle breezes, culminating in a mid-June night when Vermilion took the field at Canal Park in Akron to play in the Division II state tournament for the first time in school history.

The Sailors, the first Lorain County team to advance to the state tournament in over a decade, lost that state semifinal game 4-3 to eventual state champion Akron Archbishop Hoban but along the way coach Jeff Keck's team provided local baseball fans with some great memories including a fourth consecutive Sandusky Bay Conference title and a wild regional final where they held on to defeat archrival Firelands 17-14 at Bowling Green's Carter Park.

While the winning pitcher in that game, Jacob Klausing, is now throwing strikes at the University of Akron, Vermilion won't exactly be starting over the as it looks to make another championship run in 2022.

The Sailors will be strong up the middle with a pair of three-year starters, Jack Wells and Ethan Hendrickson, manning second base and shortstop. Wells, a University of Akron commit, didn't commit an error in 2021 while batting .354 with 21 RBIs and 33 runs.

Hendrickson also drove in 22 runs while scoring 29 and deliv-



KRISTIN BAUER | CHRONICLE TELEGRAM

Avon Lake's Perry Miller lays out to beat the tag back to first.

ering 12 extra-base hits. But it's on the pitcher's mound where he may be most valuable this spring, he had a 4-3 record with 31 strikeouts last season and will be counted on to be the ace of the Sailors pitching staff this year.

Sophomore Riley Kearns and senior Mason Schultz, both of whom were undefeated in limited roles last spring, will fill out the top of the Vermilion rotation.

The Lorain County League produced a pair of district champions in its inaugural season with Columbia winning its first district championship in school history in Division IV to join the Falcons in the Sweet Sixteen.

The good news for the Raiders is they only had one senior, catcher Jeff Grzywna, in the lineup when they lost to Warren J.F.K. in the regional semifinals so coach Dan Durante returns the deepest, most experienced roster in the LCL.

Columbia returns its top-two pitchers from 2021, seniors Andrew Champagne and Cody Davis. Champagne was 6-4 last season with an ERA under two and a team-leading 79 strikeouts. Davis was 5-4 with one of those wins coming over Cuyahoga Heights in the district finals.

Offensively the Raiders will be led by Champagne and senior

Owen Menge, who were both first-team all-districts selections last year.

The Falcons, who set a school record for wins last year with 26 while winning the first LCL title and advancing to the regional finals for the first time in school history, lost seven starters to graduation. Firelands also stole 206 bases last season.

Another team coming into 2022 with a veteran lineup looking to make a run at an LCL title is Wellington. The Dukes are coming off of a 17-8 season and return top pitchers Andrew Unangst and C.J. Polen as well as their top two hit-

See **BASEBALL**, 7

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2021 Vermilion Sailors after punching their ticket to the state final four.

BASEBALL

From 6

ters from 2021 senior Jacob Weegmann, who batted .378 with 24 RBIs and junior Wayde Bowman, a .328 hitter.

Keystone graduated 11 seniors but veteran coach Bert Fitzgerald, whose teams have averaged nearly 20 wins a year during his 10 years at the helm, returns four letter winners led by senior outfielder Aiden Rodachy and sophomore all-conference short-stop-pitcher Brock Miller.

Brookside has a new coach as Travis Baldwin takes over in the Cardinals dugout. The Cardinals have a veteran team with nine returning letter winners, eight of whom are seniors, led by all-conference catcher-second baseman Carter Villevac and pitcher-infielder Kenny Grobolssek, who had a 2.55 ERA with 23 strikeouts in 22 innings pitched in league play last season.

Both **Clearview** and **Oberlin** are looking to improve on their 2021 results.

The **Clippers** hopes riders on a quartet of seniors — Jason Buscher, Caleb Shinsky, Luke Calhoun, and Sabian Alvarado — who have dedicated themselves to helping third-year coach Miles Jones return the Clippers program to prominence.

In one season **Avon Lake** coach Andrew Means transformed the Shoremen from a below .500 team to a Southwestern Conference champion team that won 20 games. The Shoremen will try to defend their title with three of

their top pitchers, all-SWC seniors Dominic Poltrone and Perry Miller, as well as hard-throwing sophomore Drew Graham back for 2022.

Amherst didn't make the deep postseason run the Comets have

grown accustomed to last season, but Matt Rositano's team did win 20 games for the fifth year in a row, finishing the year 20-9.

The Comets return four seniors
See **BASEBALL**, 8



ANNA NORRIS | CHRONICLE TELEGRAM

Elyria's Hunter Cahl looking to make another web gem.

BASEBALL

From 7

— Giles Little, Ethan Borgsteadt, Jonathan St. Peter, and Jordan Koury — but they also lost seven players from last year's team that went on the play college baseball so 2022 will be a test to see if Amherst can churn out another 20-win team.

Elyria is hoping its first season in the SWC will be a good one. Coach Ed Piazza took him lumps last season with only one player who had varsity experience before the pandemic in his lineup but now he has a group learned from their trials last year in the Greater Cleveland Conference and are ready to win.

The **Pioneers** will be led by three players who have already committed to play college baseball next year, Hunter Cahl (Tiffin), Ryan Kowalski (Findlay), and Nick Schuster (Monroe Community College).

Under new head coach Pat Scholla **Avon** will look to get back to the top of the SWC for the first time since 2017. The Eagles have a pair of Division I commits in senior shortstop Troy Sudbrook (Toledo), who hit .380 last season, and junior Gavin Ehrhardt



Raiders righty Cody Davis is hoping for another strong campaign in 2022.

(Cincinnati), who had a 2.22 ERA with 48 strikeouts in 28.1 innings pitched. Pitcher Landin Wescott and first baseman Jacob Siegert are also committed to playing college ball at Hiram and Findlay.

North Ridgeville returns nine letter winners led by junior outfielder Gavin Padgett, who batted .351 with 15 stolen bases last year, and pitchers Jake Boynar and Noah Gredzynski, who both had over 30 strikeouts and Earned Run Averages under 3.50.

Midview is another team that returns the core of its lineup from 2021. The Middies have seven returning seniors led by all-Lorain County infielder Dominick Birth and Tyler Smith, who will lead the Middies pitching staff after posting a 2.97 ERA last spring.

Expectations are high at **Elyria Catholic** where the Panthers return nine letter winners from a team that then went 24-5, won the Great Lakes Conference, and advanced to the Division III district finals before losing to eventual state semifinalist Canton Central Catholic.

The Panthers return first-team all-Ohio outfielder Alex Carandang, a Findlay commit, who batted .500 with 26 RBIs and 24 stolen bases, outfielder Nick Thoman, a .408 hitter, and pitchers Ethan English, Gary Hurst, and Levi Ellis.

Elyria Catholic also welcomes freshman Taylor Belza, who has already orally committed to the University of West Virginia.

Lorain had its streak of four consecutive Lake Erie League

championships snapped last season, but the Titans still finished the year with a 15-11 record. Coach Brad Ternes returns his top three hitters, led by seniors Nathan Addis and Jacob Addis, who both batted over .400 while earning all-district honors.

Lake Ridge Academy has a new coach this season as Todd Morrison takes over the Royals program and welcomes back seniors Anthony Kubec, Connor Spencer, Evan Robertson, and Gavin Hammonds.

Open Door won the Lake Effect Conference in 2021, finishing the year with a 17-11 record. The Patriots will be led by all-county pitcher-third baseman Teddy Murphy, who batted .478 with 30 RBIs and tossed six complete games and recorded 70 strikeouts last season along with sophomore shortstop Tyler Reaser who had a monster freshman year with .378 average, 24 RBIs and 19 stolen bases.

With the weather getting warmer and the days growing longer get out and enjoy a game or two this spring. You never know the team you're cheering on in April could be playing for a state championship in June.



WELLINGTON DUKES FACEBOOK PAGE

Wellington's Drew Unangst is one of the top senior arms in the area.

2022

NEWS / SPORTS / TALK
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Diamond Duel Schedule

Baseball



4/5: Elyria @ Avon

4:45pm

(@ Mercy Health Stadium)

4/23: Lorain @ Keystone

11am

4/26: Avon Lake @ Elyria

4:45pm

5/6: Elyria Catholic @ Amherst

4:45pm

5/12: Firelands @ Avon

4:45pm

(@ Mercy Health Stadium)

5/14: Amherst @ Lorain

11am



Softball

4/29-4/30: Prebis Tournament

@LaGrange Community Park

4/29: Keystone vs. Walsh Jesuit 4pm

4/29: Amherst vs. Perry 6pm

4/30: Elyria Catholic vs. Madison 10am

4/30: Brecksville vs. N. Ridgeville 12pm

**5/7: 2 Games from Elyria
Softball Classic TBA**

What's old is new again



ANGELO ANGEL | CHRONICLE TELEGRAM

Another summer of affordable, family fun awaits for the boys in purple.

By: Andy Barch

There's the old saying, the more things change, the more they stay the same. That holds true when discussing the 2022 managerial position for the Lake Erie Crushers. After one year at the helm for the "Grapest Show on Turf", Dan Rohn decided to retire, leaving a huge vacancy for the men of Crush.

It didn't take long for Crushers owner Tom Kramig to find his replacement. Oddly enough, he ended up going with Rohn's predecessor, Cam Roth, who was the Lake Erie bench boss from 2016-19.

Roth left the Crushers on great terms at the end of the 2019 season when he took a position in the Detroit Tigers farm system. However, the pandemic and minor league baseball's contraction left Roth looking for a job again when the 2021 season came around.

Those that know Roth figured it wouldn't take him long to find

work in a game that he knows so well. So in 2021, he found himself back in the Frontier League as the skipper of the Gateway Grizzlies.

However, once the opportunity to return to Lake Erie presented itself, Roth jumped at the opportunity to return.



THOMAS FETCENKO | CHRONICLE TELEGRAM

The return of Crushers baseball also means the return of Friday night fireworks.

In the team's official announcement when they hired Roth back in October, Roth referenced the success that the teams he managed had, but also mentioned that his teams "didn't achieve our goal of a Frontier League title, so the job is far from finished."

Roth's teams in Lake Erie went 180-167 (.518). He first took over in 2016, not quite halfway through the season after the Crushers fired Chris Mongiardo. The team he inherited was 17-20 at the time, and though they were 10 games below .500 (32-42) on August 10th, they managed to go 16-6 the rest of the way to finish .500 on the season and narrowly missed out on a playoff spot.

The 2017 season saw the Crushers go 45-51 under Roth, before turning in a respectable 50-46 record in 2018, in which they were in the playoff race until the final

See **JOURNEY**, 11



ANGELO ANGEL | CHRONICLE TELEGRAM

Midview graduate Ryan Feierabend returned to Lorain County to pitch for the Crushers in 2021.



CHRONICLE TELEGRAM

It's always a fun time with the Lake Erie Crushers.

JOURNEY

From 10

day of the season. In Roth's final season with Lake Erie, the Crushers went 54-42 to claim a divisional crown, snapping a five-year playoff drought, the longest in the history of the franchise. So, it's easy to see why many Crushers fans are excited to see him return.

The Frontier League will look a bit more like many pictured it would in 2020 before the pandemic canceled the season. The league now features 16 teams, including the Empire State Greys, who will take over the spot vacated by the Southern Illinois Miners. The Miners decided to cease baseball operations after the 2021 season, which was a shock to those that follow the league. Other additions include three teams north of the border in Trois-Rivières, Ottawa, and Quebec.

Perhaps the biggest news in the off-season for the Frontier League revolves around their new sudden death rule. For a traditional nine-inning game, there will be one extra inning played with the international tiebreaker rule in effect (runner on

second base to start the inning). If the game is still tied after that extra inning, then sudden death will determine the winner.

According to the Frontier League's release back in January, the home team gets to choose whether they want to be on offense or defense. For the team that is on offense, the player on the lineup card immediately preceding the batter due up will start on first base. The defensive team has three outs to prevent the offense from scoring. If the offensive team scores, they win. If the defensive team retires the side without allowing a run, they win. It should be very interesting to see how this plays out.

Lake Erie will open the 2022 season at home with a three-game series against one of the aforementioned Canadian teams in the Trois-Rivières Aigles. It all begins on Friday, May 13th for the men of Crush at Mercy Health Stadium and they'll play games up until the day before Labor Day (Sept. 4). They will finish the season with a six-game road trip.

For ticket information and their newly released promotional schedule, be sure to check out the Crushers website at www.lakeerie-crushers.com.



LAKE ERIE CRUSHERS 2022 GAME SCHEDULE

MAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
					13 7:05 3R	14 6:05 3R
15 2:05 3R	16	17 TRI	18 TRI	19 TRI	20 7:05 SC	21 6:05 SC
22 2:05 SC	23	24 6:35 NY	25 11:05 NY	26 6:35 NY	27 7:05 FG	28 6:05 FG
29 2:05 FG	30	31 EVN				

JUNE

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
			1 EVN	2 EVN	3 FLO	4 FLO
5 FLO	6	7 7:05 NJ	8 7:05 NJ	9 7:05 NJ	10 7:05 JOL	11 6:05 JOL
12 2:05 JOL	13	14 WC	15 WC	16 WC	17 EVN	18 EVN
19 EVN	20	21 WSH	22 WSH	23 WSH	24 7:05 EVN	25 6:05 EVN
26 2:05 EVN	27	28 7:05 SCH	29 7:05 SCH	30 7:05 SCH		

JULY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
					1 7:05 WSH	2 7:05 WSH
3 7:05 WSH	4	5 FLO	6 FLO	7 FLO	8 7:05 GAT	9 6:05 GAT
10 5:35 GAT	11	12 7:05 JOL	13 11:05 JOL	14 7:05 JOL	15 WC	16 WC
17 WC	18	19	20	21	22 OTT	23 OTT
24 OTT	25	26 QC	27 QC	28 QC	29 7:05 NJ	30 6:05 NJ
31 5:35 NJ						

Home

Away

AUGUST

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
	1	2 7:05 EVN	3 7:05 EVN	4 7:05 EVN	5 WSH	6 WSH
7 WSH	8	9 GAT	10 GAT	11 GAT	12 7:05 FLO	13 6:05 FLO
14 5:35 FLO	15	16 7:05 SCH	17 7:05 SCH	18 7:05 SCH	19 JOL	20 JOL
21 JOL	22	23 6:35 WC	24 6:35 WC	25 6:35 WC	26 7:05 WSH	27 6:05 WSH
28 5:35 WSH	29	30 SCH	31 SCH			

SEPTEMBER

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
				1 SCH	2 GAT	3 GAT
4 GAT						

NJ NEW JERSEY JACKALS

OTT OTTAWA TITANS

NY NEW YORK BOULDERS

QC QUEBEC CAPITALES

SC SUSSEX COUNTY MINERS

TRI TRI-CITY VALLEYCATS

3R TROIS-RIVIERES AIGLES

WSH WASHINGTON WILD THINGS

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FLO FLORENCE Y'ALLS

GAT GATEWAY GRIZZLIES

JOL JOLIET SLAMMERS

SCH SCHAUMBURG BOOMERS

WC WINDY CITY THUNDERBOLTS

FG FRONTIER GREYS

LE LAKE ERIE CRUSHERS

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Guarding a summer of fun

By: Rocco Nuosci

Starting Under Pressure

America loves baseball. Right now, however, it may not like Major League Baseball. For the second time in three years, the MLB thought it would piece together a season fewer than 162 games. On March 10th, the players and owners reached a new agreement on a labor deal, with Opening Day slated for April 7th. What's more is that the league will get in a full 162-game campaign! The Guardians open the season on April 7th in Kansas City. The home opener will be April 15th against San Francisco.

The 2020 campaign had its own set of challenges with COVID-19 still newly emerging. This year, however, the excuses would not have been as accepted by the fans. It came down to money, of course. Players wanted a bigger piece of a growing pie while owners seemed unwilling to part too far from their current share. It came at a time when Americans continue to face financial hardship, among other global issues. Millionaires and billionaires arguing over money, leading to the delay of baseball, doesn't sit well with hard-working fans. The game has more young and marketable stars than ever, with Shohei Ohtani, Fernando Tatis Jr., and many others leading that charge. Now, their sport can begin again, but it's come after public



KEN BLAZE | AP

A new sign reflecting the new name for Cleveland's baseball team, the Guardians.

mockery.

So, what does this do for the new-look Cleveland Guardians? They've hit a double-whammy with this delay as fans were already torn by the name change. This dilemma between the owners and players isn't doing them any favors. One thing the team continues to have going for it is its intelligent front office. Working under financial constraints from

ownership, they continue to find young players who develop well in the minors and contribute at the top level. They aren't perfect, but they keep the team competitive. Whenever this season does get rolling, the Guardians have some nice pieces in the cupboard. Jose Ramirez is back along with a set of young top-notch starting pitchers.

Addressing the Outfield

There's no question about the fan frustration with what Cleveland has thrown together in the outfield the past few seasons. Patience is beyond thin on Bradley Zimmer, Oscar Mercado has regressed after an awesome rookie season, and FanGraphs.com currently lists Steven Kwan as the starting left fielder. He played 56 games in AA Akron last season and 23 with AAA Columbus. To be fair he hit well last year in the minors with a .328 batting average. The acquisition of center fielder Myles Straw continues to look like a brilliant move. In 60 games with Cleveland, he sported a .285 batting average with 14 RBIs and 13 stolen bases. Josh Naylor will be an interesting component to all this as well. He splits

time between first base and the corner outfield but was sidelined much of last year after a horrendous ankle injury. Whether the organization feels he's still capable of handling outfield duties will be a big question.

Daniel Johnson is sure to see his opportunities at the big-league level once again this season. He posted a .286 batting average against left-handed pitching last season but put up a pedestrian .214 against right-handers. The Guardians are hoping for more consistency than that this time around.

Cleveland has featured a different primary center fielder every season since 2016. The corner outfield spots haven't been much better. For as well as this organization can develop starting pitching, they seem inept in terms of evolving stud outfielders. One guy to keep an eye on in AAA Columbus to start the season is Oscar Gonzalez. After seeing a good amount of him in AA Akron last year, the man can crush the baseball. In 121 games between Akron and Columbus, Oscar posted a .293 batting average with 83 RBIs

See **GUARDIANS**, 14



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Ace Shane Bieber will once again lead Cleveland's starting pitching rotation.



Manager Terry Francona has his hands full once again with a young, but talented, ballclub.

GUARDIANS

From 13

and 31 home runs. Those 31 long-balls were tied for 7th-most in the minors last season. Defensively he played right-field primarily with a .967 fielding average. That leaves plenty to be desired on that side of the game. Still, Cleveland fans would gladly trade some defensive for a sliver of offense in that outfield.

One thing is for sure, this will be a new-look outfield. Last year's starting outfield consisted of Jordan Luplow, Eddie Rosario, and Josh Naylor. Only one of those guys is even on the team anymore.

Changes on the Infield

The interior of the Guardians' defense won't be without changes either. Jose Ramirez

will resume his starting spot over at third base. Other than perhaps Amed Rosario at shortstop, there's not much else to set in stone long-term here. Once Cesar Hernandez was traded away, chances at second base were given to the likes of Ernie Clement, Owen Miller, and Andres Gimenez. None of those three performed especially well, leaving the door open for others this season. One prospect to watch is Tyler Freeman. MLB.com predicts he will hit the big-league level this season. Despite not playing past the AA-level yet, Freeman posted a .323 batting average in Akron last season. He mostly played shortstop last season, so Rosario could feel some pressure on his starting spot in a hurry. Third-base prospect Nolan Jones is also knocking on the major league doorstep. He

did struggle in AAA Columbus in 2021, seeing his batting average dwindle to .238. That may have hampered expectations for now, but he remains top-five on the Guardians prospect list. If he plays his way to the MLB level, we could see a positional change for either him or Ramirez.

The question mark over first base looms large once again. Fans have been dying for Bobby Bradley to prove himself as a starter at that spot. The problem is that he simply hasn't cut it. His 41 RBIs and 16 home runs provided a nice pop to Cleveland's lineup last season. However, his .208 batting average isn't something to take lightly. His average against left-handed pitching is particularly troubling, sitting at .162. His strikeout per plate appearance percentage was 35.5%, meaning he goes down on strikes over a third of the time he bats. The power from the young slugger is certainly there. It's just about everything else that needs to catch up though. Yu Chang will likely start the season behind Bradley at first base. Behind the dish, all signs point towards Austin Hedges remaining the starter to open the year with Roberto Perez getting traded to Pittsburgh over the winter.

Pitching Carrying... Again

No question the starting pitching will once again carry the load in Cleveland. A projected starting rotation of Shane Bieber, Cal Quantrill, Zach Plesac, Aaron Civale, and Triston McKenzie looks nice. The pitching took a step-back for Cleveland in 2021, with the team ERA coming in at 18th overall in the league at 4.34. However, injuries kept Bieber sidelined much of the year and caused inconsistencies within the rotation at times. It's impossible to expect perfect health from that group all year this time around. However, if Shane can remain healthy most of the way, that should provide the consistency that the group needs.

In the bullpen, things get interesting. Emmanuel Clase and James Karinchak return as the 8th and 9th inning guys. However, Karinchak was lit

up by opposing lineups last year, especially after the whole "sticky stuff" ban across the league. That's just one theory, as a rampant increase in innings pitched also could have made an impact. Still, James is someone to keep an eye on. Lefties Sam Hentges and Logan Allen look to be back in the Cleveland pen to chew up innings. Eli Morgan, a righty who saw starting opportunities in 2021, is projected to start this season in the pen as well. Anthony Gose, Trevor Stephan, and Nick Sandlin are the remaining names that FanGraphs.com projects will start in 2022 in the Cleveland bullpen.

Staying Relevant

Baseball is not shining bright in the public eye right now, especially not the Guardians in Cleveland. It's hard to blame fans for that with a name change stacked on top of a shortened season. One thing is for sure, fans are growing tired of ownership not spending on players. A big-name free agent hasn't been nabbed since Edwin Encarnacion. That seems like ages ago. After knocking on the door of a World Series title in 2016, it's been a tailspin the other direction ever since.

One move made in February, per Forbes.com, could have a huge impact on Cleveland baseball. Co-owner of both the Philadelphia 76ers and New Jersey Devils, David Blitzer, has a pending investment of 35% of the Guardians ownership, equating to about \$1 billion. Will this lead to more investment into better players? Time will tell, but it is nice to see someone outside of the Dolans investing in this ballclub.

It's an uphill battle for the Guardians in 2022. This team isn't expected to compete for a title, but it needs to show some signs of life. Interest in Cleveland baseball seems to be at an all-time low. I hope to see that sentence become laughable by the end of the summer.



2022 SEASON SCHEDULE

Regular season games originally scheduled for March 31 through April 6 will be rescheduled soon.

MARCH/APRIL

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
27	28	29	30	31		
				KC		KC
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
KC	MIN	MIN	MIN		KC	KC
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
KC	KC	CIN	CIN		SF	SF
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
SF	CWS	CWS	CWS	CWS	NYN	NYN
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
NYN	LAA	LAA	LAA	LAA	OAK	OAK

MAY

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
OAK		SD	SD	TOR	TOR	TOR
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
TOR	CWS	CWS	CWS		MIN	MIN
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
MIN		CIN	CIN		DET	DET
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
DET	HOU	HOU	HOU	DET	DET	DET
29	30	31				
DET	KC	KC				

JUNE

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
			1	2	3	4
			KC		BAL	BAL
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
BAL	TEX	TEX	TEX	OAK	OAK	OAK
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
OAK		COL	COL	COL	LAD	LAD
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
LAD		MIN	MIN	MIN	BOS	BOS
26	27	28	29	30		
BOS	MIN	MIN	MIN	MIN		

JULY

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
					1	2
					NYN	NYN
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
NYN	DET	DET	DET		KC	KC
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
KC	CWS	CWS	CWS		DET	DET
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
DET					CWS	CWS
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
CWS	BOS	BOS	BOS	BOS	TB	TB

AUGUST

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
	1	2	3	4	5	6
	ARI	ARI	ARI	HOU	HOU	HOU
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
HOU		DET	DET	DET	TOR	TOR
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
TOR	DET	DET	DET		CWS	CWS
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
CWS		SD	SD	SEA	SEA	SEA
28	29	30	31			
SEA		BAL	BAL			

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
				1	2	3
				BAL	SEA	SEA
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
SEA	KC	KC	KC		MIN	MIN
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
MIN	LAA	LAA	LAA		MIN	MIN
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
MIN		CWS	CWS	CWS	TEX	TEX
25	26	27	28	29	30	1
TEX		TB	TB	TB	KC	KC

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All game dates and times are subject to change. Schedule tentative as of January 2022.

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Sunday, July 21	11:00am Elyria United Methodist Church Service - On Air & Stream 1
Monday, July 22	
7:00am	The WEOL Morning Show - On Air & Stream 1
3:00pm	Bull's Eye on the Afternoon
Tuesday, July 23	
7:00am	The WEOL Morning Show - On Air & Stream 1
3:00pm	Bull's Eye on the Afternoon
Wednesday, July 24	
7:00am	The WEOL Morning Show - On Air & Stream 1
3:00pm	Bull's Eye on the Afternoon



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