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It is a cold day in Radford, but inside the new practice facility the baseball team is already hard at work looking for another successful season. Last year the baseball team's run was unprecedented. They captured the Big South regular season title, the Big South tournament that assured them a berth into the College World Series tournament. In the NCAA regional in Nashville, Tennessee, Radford fell in their first game against Indiana 7-1. On Saturday, May 30, Radford won their first NCAA tournament baseball game in the program's history taking down Lipscomb 5-2. The following day, the Highlanders got revenge over Indiana with a 5-3 win before ultimately falling to then-defending national champion Vanderbilt in the regional final.

For a small school like Radford, the accomplishment was huge and many of the returning players feel like they can go even further this season.

"It was surreal. It was almost like an 'out of body' experience. It was one of those things where you didn't realize what was happening until it was over and when I look back on it now I still get chills to this day thinking of what we accomplished. It was fun showing up to the ballpark every day and just going out and having fun," said junior infielder Danny Hrbek. "The first game (loss to Indiana in the NCAA regional) was a culture shock with the lack of experience being there but once we got the first W (the next day vs. Mercer) out of the way it was kind of like 'we could do this, there's a reason why we're here.'"

On the mound, the Highlanders lost two key arms to the MLB draft in Michael Boyle and Ryan Meisinger. However, Daniel Bridgeman, Kyle Palmer, Zack Ridgely, and Austin Ross look to step it up.

"Boyle and Meisinger did a great job last year. They're definitely big shoes to fill but I think our staff is pretty deep especially in the starting spot. I think our bullpen is pretty young and needs to step up but I think we got the arms to fill the role so I think we'll be just fine," said junior pitcher Austin Ross.

There are four starters returning. One of them is senior outfielder Shane Johnsonbaugh.

"We want to build off last year and come out every day and compete day by day. We want to focus on one day at a time and win every ballgame we can, one day at a time," said

Johnsonbaugh.

Head coach Joe Raccuia is also a Radford Alumni from the class of 1995. He played baseball for the Highlanders and has coached the team for the past eight seasons. Getting to the tournament last year, he is not only proud of how much the program has progressed, but how they have handled it.

“Looking back on it, it was a little bit like a dream but while going through the season, it felt real because it was hard. Everyday there was something else in front of you,” Raccuia said. “I’m more impressed with how they’ve handled it. As the wins started accumulating, the recognition started to come, the cameras started to show up, and people started to pay attention to us... people from Richmond and Virginia Beach starting to interview guys, it never affected them. That was the neat part about it, it’s that they really stuck to the plan and the process. Hopefully this group learned a lot from it moving forward.”

The Highlanders open their 2016 season this Friday at Mercer. The home opener is on Friday, March 4 vs. Hartford. The schedule highlights include home and away games against Virginia Tech, a home series vs. George Mason in April, and a two-game road swing at Vanderbilt, a rematch of last year’s regional final, on March 8 and 9.

“That [series with Vanderbilt] was about three years in the making. Everyone thinks that it came off of last year,” Raccuia added. “If it would have come off of last year, that would have been crazy doing scheduling. I want to bring our guys into competitive atmospheres and during spring break go away for a couple days and play an SEC team. It has nothing to do with last year, it’s just another challenging game on the schedule.”

In late January, the Big South revealed their preseason poll. Despite the success of Radford last season and a promising season ahead for the Highlanders, Radford was picked to finish fifth with 81 points. The teams ahead of Radford were (from 4-1) High Point, Liberty, Winthrop, and Coastal Carolina. The Highlanders hope to prove them wrong this year, defend their Big South crown, and “let em watch!”

When asked about how pleased he is with the progress of the program, Raccuia closed his interview by saying, “It is rewarding seeing this program progress as a coach but I really only think about it when people asked me. It’s a job to me. I think more importantly it’s more of the guys that I’ve played with that I love seeing reactions and their faces when we win more than mine because they’re so pumped up about the program.”

Hopefully, not only alumni will be pumped up about the program, but so will the students

and fans.



Courtesy of Radford Athletics