

With many regulars returning, West Mifflin has high hopes

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West Mifflin Area baseball coach Jeff Kuzma says it isn't in his head.

He also says his team is free from any psychological aftershocks.

Still, scars must linger from how the past two seasons have concluded for the Titans. Kuzma finally guided West Mifflin to the postseason in each of the last two campaigns — the Titans were section champs in 2007 and 2008 and carried big expectations into the playoffs — but came up empty in the first round both times.

Much of West Mifflin's lineup returns this season as Kuzma once again takes aim

at postseason success.

"The first thing is making the playoffs and we realize that," Kuzma said. "But the early exit from the playoffs the last two years has made this year's team hungry to get another shot at the WPIAL title." West Mifflin doesn't boast a lineup filled with powerful hitters or a dominant pitching staff. Rather, Kuzma's squad is best known for its dynamic defensive ability.

At West Mifflin, the pitching staff need not focus on recording strikeouts because of the terrific defense that has highlighted the last two seasons.

Aces Mike Neckerman and Jon Lutz were lost to graduation and Kuzma knows his team's defense is an important key.

"I'm a big believer that you need good defense to win in high school baseball," he said. "That's something that I have always stressed here and that will never change."

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There is little question that defense has put the Titans over the top in Section 4-AAA the last two seasons. Shortstop Nick Miler and second baseman Kevin Quinn form one of the WPIAL's best double play tandems.

Third baseman Mike Mroz, one of the WPIAL's most feared hitters, is terrific defensively and Jesse Clayton takes over fulltime at first this spring.

"That infield is just great," Kuzma said. "I'm really, really excited about what those guys can do. Nicky Miler, I mean, everyone knows what he can do at shortstop. He's just a great shortstop and, quite honestly, the whole infield is excellent." With seemingly every team in Section 4-AAA possessing a comparable lineup, good defense has often been the difference — especially in colder weather, when a couple errors can hand a team a victory.

"That all goes into it," he said. "Obviously we've got some defensive talent here, and it's something we work very hard to make better and better.

"We're very serious about playing good defense." Kuzma also speaks highly of starting outfielders Scott Commander, Ricky Olsz and Brian Ripper.

If West Mifflin is to produce a break-out player this year, Kuzma thinks it might be junior catcher Bill Hodgetts.

"I really like what I see from him," Kuzma said. "He's definitely someone I've got my eye on. He could have a very big year for us." All the good defense in the world, of course, is worthless without an effective pitching staff.

Seniors Billy Bendgen and Josh Dawida, along with junior Jeff Ziegler, have been pegged as the top three starters.

"I feel good about them," Kuzma said. "I really do. They have the potential to be very good." West Mifflin opens its season March 24 at a Cocoa Beach, Fla., tournament before returning home for a couple of tune-ups.

Section play begins April 3 against Ringgold.

Kuzma said winning a third consecutive section title won't be easy.

"It's a tough section as always," he said. "I really feel like Trinity is the favorite. And with teams like Thomas Jefferson and all the others, it's going to be tough." Kuzma, of course, will trade another section title for that first playoff win.

"We need to get back to the playoffs and we need to learn how to stay strong throughout the playoffs," he said. "All we want is another opportunity to get back there."

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