

## Division play no laughing matter

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By Scott Dudinskie

Bill Clark was talking about the Heartland-II baseball hierarchy when his mock agony was finally broken by laughter.

Laughing sure beats the alternative.

Clark's Shamokin squad had to grind to make the postseason last year—achieving the qualifying minimum of a .500 record with a win in its regular season finale—only to be thrown into the fire of the District 4 Class AAA playoffs.

That's a classification above what the Indians play most often in HAC-II. But even a date with two-time defending Class AAA champ Jersey Shore wasn't as daunting as some of their division games.

After all, HAC-II featured last season's Class AA state champion in Loyalsock; the District 4 Class AA champion, Hughesville, which beat Loyalsock for the title; and South Williamsport, a team that finished one win behind Loyalsock for the HAC-II crown.

"We had a nice season in a competitive league," Clark deadpanned.

Truly, HAC-II is no joke. "I would put it up against any league in the state of Pennsylvania," said Central Columbia coach Brett Sarnoski. "There are so many quality teams."

**Loyalsock** is the favorite to repeat in the division—if not the state—with three juniors ACC recruits leading the way.

Shortstop/pitcher Kyle Datres is committed to North Carolina, pitcher Luke Glavin is pledged to Duke, and outfielder Jimmy Webb is ticketed for Wake Forest. Corner infielder Tommy Baggett and catcher Evan Moore, two more juniors, give the Lancers at least five Division I prospects. And they have a returning all-state outfielder in senior Robbie Klein.

"These kids have been groomed since they were little. It's been their dream to play major college baseball and they worked extremely hard. That's paying off for our program," said Lancers coach Jeremy Eck. "That said, they've still got to come out and perform. The biggest concern as a coaching staff is we cannot let these guys get complacent."

**South Williamsport and Hughesville**, which finished second and third, respectively, behind the Lancers last season both return strong core groups and figure to contend again.

**Warrior Run** returns its entire starting lineup, including three pitchers, from the division's last-place team. New coach Harold Raup is optimistic the Defenders can compete if they can back senior Hunter Raup (two wins), and juniors Jared Bender (one) and Derek Keiser.

"I think we have a shot at making the playoffs," said Raup. "I think pitching could be one of our strengths, but our key this season is playing good defense and playing as a team. If we do those two things, we will make a run for the playoffs."

**Lewisburg** finished just a game ahead of Warrior Run in the division, but the Green Dragons suffered seven

losses by one or two runs. Second-year coach Kevin Kline has a strong group of returning senior infielders, led by shortstop Luke Smith (.353 avg.) and catcher Jacob Girton (HAC-II all-star), as well as Jesse Flannery and Zach Benner. Smith had a 2.24 ERA over 25 innings.

Former **Shamokin** all-state pitcher Jared Petrovich returned to his alma mater to groom the team's young arms. But the Indians were hit harder by graduation than in any of Clark's previous six seasons.

"We're really green, so we're going to have to approach things a lot different," said Clark. "We do have a nice freshman and sophomore class who I think are going to be pretty good on the mound, but it's going to be tough in this league. They're going to have to take their lumps and keep growing. I think they will. They're competitive, and those situations will motivate them."

**Mount Carmel**, the Indians' archrival, graduated their top two run-producers in DH Jayson Stellar (.438 avg., 22 RBIs) and all-star catcher Danny Lesko (.393, 17). The Red Tornadoes, though, have high hopes for Michael Pupo, who batted .396 as a sophomore leadoff hitter last season. If he can duplicate a .515 on-base percentage, it will go a long way toward sparking their offense.

**Central Columbia** snuck into the Class AA playoffs with a .500 record despite being swept by the division's Big Three. The Blue Jays won seven of their first 10 games, with the majority of those wins coming outside the division. A young group is led by seniors Cody Bowman, a league all-star at catcher, and first baseman Jake Klinger.

"We have a lot of new places that's fostered a lot of competition in spots," said Sarnoski. "There's nothing about the lineup that's set in stone and that makes practices better and more challenging.

"The bottom line is you have to play good baseball night in and night out in this league or you're going to be coming home with losses. If you make the playoffs from our league, though, you're certainly going to be battle-tested."