

Celtics return senior arms, ready to compete for GVC

By **DEREK WILEY**
Of the Keizertimes

McNary head baseball coach Larry Keeker expects the Celts to compete for the Greater Valley Conference title in 2017.

But there are question marks, particularly at pitcher.

While senior Josiah Gilbert, who was a First Team all-league selection after going 6-3 with a 3.94 ERA and 65 strikeouts in 2016, will start the season as McNary's ace, the rest of the pitching staff is unproven.

"In terms of just talent, this team certainly has the chance to be a league champion," Keeker said. "Really the question is going to be how well we pitch. Even Josiah, even though he's proven, he has to come back and have a good senior year and then it depends on the rest of the staff. We're going to need to be able to pitch."

Two seniors, Riley Hays and Kevin Martin, both missed their junior seasons with shoulder injuries. But Hays was at least able to return and pitch in the summer.

Kyle McCallister, Matthew Ismay, Jonah Geist and Carl Rumbaugh could also eat up innings for the Celtics.

"There's still some debate on who the three game a week starters would be but Josiah's going to be one of them and after that it's really still to be determined," Keeker said. "We try to develop as many pitchers as we can. We keep guys throwing in the gym or in the summers as much as possible because if you don't have that depth, you get to those games that are backed up, you could be going five, six, seven guys deep in a week."

While senior Daniel Johnson caught nearly every game last season, Keeker said sophomore Tyler Covalt's bat may

be too good to keep out of the lineup.

"He's (Covalt) a really good baseball kid," Keeker said. "He hasn't proven himself as a varsity hitter yet because he hasn't played varsity but he had a good summer. He's only a sophomore but he's certainly going to get his opportunities. If we feel both of those guys need to be in the lineup, the nice thing is Daniel has proven in the past that he can play an infield position as well."

Johnson isn't the only player who will give Keeker flexibility when making the lineup. While Brendan Frizelle is back in centerfield and Josh Benson and Collin

Wentworth are expected to man the middle infield at second base and shortstop, every other position is up for grabs.

When they're not pitching, Gilbert could play at third or in the outfield while Ismay, who led the Celtics with 21 RBI and a .400 batting average last season, could start at either corner infield positions.

"There's 16 kids on varsity and lots of interchangeable parts this spring," Keeker said. "I think it's a great dilemma to have because it gives us options. Sometimes it's hard to get in a rhythm because maybe you don't know where you're going to play on a regular basis but guys are just going to be flexible this spring.

That's just the way it is. Eventually, they'll settle in. We'll figure out a rhythm and it will come down to who can hit, who can make plays."

Keeker expects the GVC to be competitive, with Sprague, returning almost its entire lineup, and West Albany, bringing back all three of its top pitchers, as the favorites.

McNary opens the regular season Wednesday, March 15 at home against Canby.

First pitch is 4:30 p.m.



File
Top: Collin Wentworth is expected to start the season at shortstop. Bottom: Riley Hays is returning to the mound after shoulder surgery cost him his junior season.



File
McNary senior Brendan Frizelle is back in centerfield for the Celtics in 2017.

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