

SPORTS



The Tenafly High School softball team includes, top row from left, assistant coach Christine Giordano, assistant coach Lauren Brown, Kayla Riley, Claire Guittman, Alex Bugner, Anna Taufield, Meghan Koehler, Anna Schuermans, Macy Salmon, Hanna Skowronski, head coach Jeff Koehler; middle row, Rori Kramon, Ginger Koslow, Kendal Gordon; and bottom row, Gigi Linde, Mikayla Barquin, Lexie Lazarus, Abby Liebowitz, Gaby Linde, Giselle Cerutti and Megan George. COURTESY JEFF KOEHLER

Tigers are 'super strong' up the middle

Bob Shwalm
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After being hit by the tidal wave of a pandemic, the Tenafly softball team is wading through muddy waters this spring.

For one, the Tiger seniors are developing their leadership skills on the fly, having never had an opportunity to learn from their predecessors. Secondly, the team's annual preseason trip to Florida was canceled for a second straight year, costing the girls a valuable opportunity to bond as a team. Lastly, a

host of inexperienced players were thrown directly into the varsity fire.

While Tenafly coach Jeff Koehler called his team "a work in progress," things are working just fine.

This spring, Tenafly has rolled out to its best start in years with a 9-2 record. The squad is 4-1 in the Big North-National and contending for a rare Jewish: The fifth championship in the program's 46-year history.

The team, which has never won a county or state championship, captured conference titles in 2001, 2005, 2007

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and 2008.

"I don't know if everyone understands what we can be ... what it's like playing in counties and states ... the magnitude of being in big games," Koehler said.

"The most important thing with our team is going to be how we react in the big moment."

Koehler said his team's success is the result of several factors.

To start, Tenafly is super strong up the middle and has a standout pitcher in junior Claire Guittman. Also included in this core group are junior catcher Alex Bugner, senior second baseman Megan George and junior shortstop Gaby Linde.

Tenafly also has terrific

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Jeff Koehler
White Tenafly coach

ic new assistant coach in Lauren Brown, who starred on the River Dell mound as recently as 2017. And despite their inexperience as leaders, the Tigers have three strong senior captains in Kendal Gordon, Anna Schuermans and George.

Just about everything has gone right for Koehler's team this spring, with the exception of a 6-3 loss to league rival Old Tappan on April 26. Koehler looked at the bright side, calling it "a good learning experi-

ence."

"The first two innings we spotted them three runs on routine plays ... something you can't do against a team like that," Koehler said. "But we settled down after that and showed we could play with them."

The Tigers and Golden Knights will meet again on May 24 in a game that could decide this year's league winner. Koehler said his girls aren't focused on that game but on raising their game from now until then.

"We're not looking for anything but to improve every day," Koehler said. "Come to practice, learn something, and hopefully be better individually and as a team."

"We've got a great bunch of girls and I'm excited to see what happens," he added. "We can definitely be one of the surprise teams in the county this year."

Here's a closer look at this year's Tenafly roster:

Guittman, who was lights out as a freshman before suffering a fractured arm, has a loaded arsenal of pitches. Koehler feels she's already one of the best pitchers in the state and that a consistent change-up would make her a big-time collegiate prospect. Guittman is also the team's powerful cleanup hitter and batting just under .500.

Bugner is a vocal leader behind the plate who

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bats fifth in the lineup. She only struck out one time as a freshman and is more than just an outstanding contact hitter; she hits line drives and gaps on a regular basis.

Sophomore first baseman Hanna Skowronski is playing her first season of big-time softball and is a line drive hitter with a high ceiling. Koehler feels that added confidence could make Skowronski "a dynamic player ... something special."

George was the team's No. 2 pitcher as an underclassman but pitched the lion's share due to teammates' injuries. Also a talented outfielder, George moved to second base this spring. Koehler said George does anything for

the team and is "everything you want in an athlete."

Linde, the team's smooth-fielding shortstop, is batting over .400 as the team's No. 3 hitter. She's got terrific range, a rifle-like arm and played centerfield as a freshman. Linde gave up softball in elementary school after suffering a serious injury but Koehler says she's now one of Bergen County's best players.

Linde's twin sister Gigi is the team's third baseman and its only returning 1st-Team All-League player. The Tigers' leadoff

hitter shows off her catlike reflexes at the hot corner and her great speed on the baselines. Gigi Linde is only 5 feet, 3 inches tall but Koehler says outfielders who move in on her often see the ball flying over their heads.

Freshman Ginger Koslow is the team's fast-rising left fielder. She batted righty until a couple weeks into the season before becoming a lefty slap hitter. Koslow took off from there and is now batting close to .400 from the two hole. She covers tons of ground in the outfield and will likely play center in the years to come.

Koehler saw Schuermans throwing the football around in his physical education class as a sophomore and convinced her to try softball. Already a standout on the volleyball court, Schuermans has no aversion to diving and has put together a highlight reel of diving catches in the outfield. Koehler called her "a terrific kid and a great all-around athlete."

Rightfielder Gordon is getting past an ankle injury but is one of the better hitters on the team. She has plenty of pop in her bat and a propensity for ripping the ball down the line. Koehler called her "a team-first player, all the way."

Koehler brought two of his championship volleyball team's players onto the diamond this spring. His daughter, Meghan, plays second base while Anna Taufield plays center. The sophomores are fast and athletic and pinch runners who steal bases at will. Jeff Koehler said they've helped immeasurably by showing the younger players what it takes to be successful varsity athletes and by helping to build a winning culture.

Tenafly's varsity squad also includes three very promising underclassmen in sophomores Abby Liebowitz and Macy Salmon and freshman Rori Kramon.

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