

VARSIITYXTRA: PREP SOFTBALL PREVIEW

Year of the pitcher

Preseason rankings 5A-I

- Basha:** Defending champions return arguably the best pitcher in the state in Samantha Parlich.
- St. Mary's:** The 2007 champs and 2008 semifinalists will ride Dallas Escobedo, but lost three key seniors.
- Corona del Sol:** All-everything catcher Ashley Hansen is gone to Stanford, but everyone else returns from '08 title game appearance.
- Red Mountain:** A young team which reached the state quarterfinals last year returns mostly intact.
- Gilbert:** Shaundra Gutierrez is quickly building a budding program as Fiesta champs return both starting pitchers.

5A-II

- Sunrise Mountain:** Defending state champions return both pitchers and top two run producers.
- Sunnyside:** Senior ace Ivy Campas returns as Blue Devils' vie to resume 2007 championship glory.
- Centennial:** Lost one senior from '08 quarterfinals team.
- Deer Valley:** Lost a lot of offense, but top two pitchers return for perennial contenders.
- Horizon:** Abundance of talent past two years has graduated, but Blaize Gatti teams always regroup.

4A-I

- Canyon del Oro:** Pitcher Kenzie Fowler's swan song again makes the defending champions the team to beat.
- Chaparral:** ASU-bound pitcher/sluggger Mackenzie Popescue makes them contenders.
- Sahuaro:** The Cougars made the title game as a No. 7 seed last season, and have a host of key players returning.
- Cienega:** Ace Alexa Cash and top hitter Brittany Keiser are back to lead the Bobcats on another state title run.
- Paradise Valley:** Annie Lockwood is gone, but key bats are back.

4A-II

- Seton Catholic:** Ace Olivia Bergman and the heart of the order returns for a Sentinels team with title aspirations.
- Mingus:** The Marauders made it to the semifinals without any seniors last year.
- Tempe:** Steph Pesqueira is back on the mound, and top eight hitters return for Buffaloes.
- Greenway:** The pitching is back, but the Demons lost hitters that were key to last year's title run.
- Arcadia:** Two titles and a runner-up finish the past three years, but Paula Liebler isn't around any longer.

By MARK HELLER
TRIBUNE

If this is the year of the pitcher in East Valley baseball parlance — and it looks like it — you can copy and paste the same theme to softball.

That's probably true of most seasons given the importance of dominant pitching, but a quick glance of the returning aces this spring around this area makes it clear who has the upper-hand, at least out of the gate.

A healthy portion of Chandler Basha is back to defend its 5A Division I state championship, with Arizona State-bound Samantha Parlich leading the way. She of the 0.91 ERA (and that was after Tempe Corona del Sol scored five runs in the state title game) and 200 strikeouts.

She also hit .553 with 40 runs scored and 43 RBIs.

Phoenix St. Mary's junior Dallas Escobedo can swing the bat, too — and will play with Parlich at ASU in two years — but this is supposed to be about pitching, so let's focus on her 479 strikeouts and 28-6 record from 2008.

From Mesa Red Mountain, to Dobson, Chandler,

Others to watch

Apache Junction: Lindsay Skinner, So., C; Chelsey Striebich, Jr., IF; Shelby Olson, Jr., P

Basha: Desiree Mejia, Jr., C; Chelsea Rodriguez, Jr., IF

Chandler: Shantel Hunter, Sr., OF; Alexis Leonard, So., P/IF; Amber Smith, Jr., IF; Vanessa Ybarra, So., IF

Dobson: Katie Doyle, Sr., C/IF; Melissa Becker, Sr., P/IF; Kelsey Clark, Sr., 3B

Gilbert: Michelle Duncan, So., P; Tiffanee Frampton, Sr., IF; Alexa Redman, Fr., OF

Hamilton: Courtney Harris, So., IF; Brittney Gant, Jr., IF/P; Nicole Upshaw, So., IF; Stephanie Rieck, Jr., C

Highland: Christine Napodano, Jr., IF; Chelsea Rodriguez, Sr., IF; Ashleigh Seipel, Jr., C

Mesa: Shauntei Turley, Sr., IF/C; Lexi Brown, Sr., SS

Mesquite: Kaitlyn Greco, So., P; Rachel Meyer, Jr., IF; Alexis Lawton, Jr., IF; Lexis Townsend, Jr., P

Mountain View: Lisa Tarnowski, Sr., OF/C; Jenny Ramsaier, Sr., SS; Kharissa Renoth, Sr., 2B

Perry: Jessica Wilkinson, So., P; Meghan Stetka, So., IF

Queen Creek: Jamie Kottcamp, Sr., IF; Davina Keller, Sr., IF

Red Mountain: Kayla Ensminger, Sr., OF; Mel Willadson, Jr., P; Skyline: Jenny Willis, So., P/IF

Valley Christian: Shelby Richardson, Jr., Caitlin Sanford, Sr., IF/OF; IF/C; Hayley Temple, Sr., P/IF; Ashley Titus, So., IF

Westwood: Angela Arredondo, Sr., IF; Megan Kowal, Sr., IF

Did you know?

Last year's local region champs were: Gilbert High (5A-I Fiesta Region); Mesa Red Mountain (5A-I East Valley Region), Chandler Basha (5A-I Central), Scottsdale Horizon (5A-II Pima) and Chandler Seton Catholic (4A-II East Sky). The 5A-I state champ was Basha, 5A-II state champ was Peoria Sunrise Mountain, 4A-I champion was Canyon Del Oro, the 4A-II state champ was Phoenix Greenway and Benson took the 2A crown. Gilbert Highland has a new coach this season, as Jamie Waldron takes over the Hawks program in place of Ben Leeson.

Gilbert and Chandler Valley Christian, the fireball-fest is back. Evens Peoria schools Sunrise Mountain and Centennial return their teams nearly intact in 5A-II, Same with Glendale Deer Valley.

In 4A-I, Tucson Canyon del Oro's Kenzie Fowler and Scottsdale Chaparral's Mackenzie Popescue have dominated the past three years, and they won't be letting up as seniors. Olivia Bergman returns for Chandler Seton as the Sentinels make a run for the 4A-II title.

Our advice: Take some extra batting practice. It may not help much, but anything to score two runs will be worth trying this spring.

CONTACT WRITER:

(480) 898-6576

or mheller@evtrib.com

Players to watch

1. Sam Parlich, Basha: Diminutive yet dominant on the mound; 2008 Tribune Player of the Year is also excellent hitter.

2. Dallas Escobedo, St. Mary's: 479 K in 229 IP as sophomore and improving hitter; Plans to eventually join Parlich at ASU.

3. Lucy Aubrecht, Red Mountain: The senior catcher/infielder is this year's cornerstone to a young Mountain Lions squad anxious to one-up last year's tournament run.

4. Kelsey Rodriguez, Seton: Hit .604 with 10 triples and 34 RBIs last season.

5. Bailey Blake, Gilbert: Tigers table-setter is key after all-region shortstop hit .419 with 40 runs and 19 RBI.

Key dates

Lion Country Classic: Thursday through Saturday; Red Mountain HS and Cooley Park

Marcos de Niza-Dobson Invitational: Thursday through Saturday; Dobson and Marcos de Niza

Dorados Classic: Thursday through Saturday; Tucson Sport Park

Marcos de Niza-McClintock Invitational: March 7-11; McClintock and Marcos de Niza high schools

Sandra Day O'Connor-Deer Valley Festival: March 19-21; Deer Valley and SDO high schools

Wolves Classic: March 31-April 3; Horizon Park, hosted by Desert Mountain HS

State tournaments: 5A-I and 5A-II May 2-15; 4A-II May 9-16; 2A May 8-16



Basha senior
Samantha Parlich

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VX VOTE

This week's poll question

Which E.V. basketball player would you most like to watch in the 5A state tournament?

John Bailey, Dobson
Matt Carlino, Highland
Elliot Clark, Gilbert
Jason Edwards, Chandler
Eric Hunt, Mountain View
Demetrius Walker, St. Mary's

Kameron Knutson, Dobson
Jennifer Schlott, Mtn. View
Maylinn Smith, Mesquite
Whitney Southerland, Gilbert
Davellyn Whyte, St. Mary's
Morgan Wohltman, Highland

Vote online at varsity.evtrib.com. Poll closes at 4 p.m. on Tuesday.

Last week's results 172 votes

What is your reaction to the one-year postseason ban and probation Mesa High received for a recruiting violation?

Why punish Mesa? Other schools get away with much worse.

40%

Punishment was just. They got what they deserved.

29%

Forfeits were enough punishment. Seniors deserved chance to play at state.

26%

Penalty wasn't harsh enough.

5%

VX SCHOOL SPIRIT

Leaders through Tuesday

>> Chandler56.0
>> Chaparral 51.0
>> Tempe30.0
>> Mountain View22.5
>> Highland20.0

>> Schools receive points for participating at varsity.evtrib.com by submitting player profile pages, photos, unsung heroes, scholar athletes, etc. See varsity.evtrib.com for complete standings, rules and details.