

# First-year coach Katie Perkins turns around Evanston softball program



(Kevin Tanaka, Pioneer Press)

By **Heather Rule**  
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**B**y the end of the softball season, perhaps Evanston will party like it's 1999.

The year is not arbitrary. The Evanston softball program has just one winning season since then.

"Which is a little bit baffling," said coach Katie Perkins, who is in her first year leading Evanston's varsity team. "I'm happy to say that we've surpassed where the team was last year."

That team managed an 11-19 record.

So what's changed? A new coach, for one thing. Perkins led Evanston's JV team the past three years.

The Wildkits (13-5 overall, 6-1 Central Suburban South entering the week) have just two seniors on the team — center fielder Maddy Managlia and third baseman Gina Hopf — and both are "playing key roles in turning this

Evanston program around," Perkins said. They've certainly been around for transitions: Perkins is their third coach in their four-year varsity careers.

Managlia said the different coaches have been a good thing.

"We've gained so many different perspectives on the game," she said.

It's definitely a different mentality with the new coach, and Perkins is a lot harder on them than past coaches, Hopf said.

"We have that mental strength to say we can get back up ... bring the momentum back," Hopf said.

When Perkins first came into the program, she said "it was almost like losing was OK."

This year, the expectations have been raised drastically.

"The mental shift is the key identifier from this year versus last year," Perkins said.

Losing isn't acceptable, and that doesn't just apply to the win-loss record. It's also about individual plays on the field. The players have decided they want to win each play, which has helped eliminate errors, Perkins said.

She uses the acronym WIN, or What's Important Now. What's important to Evanston is winning that one play, that one pitch or that one ball put in play. Doing that allows the players to have a better focus and maximize their full ability, Perkins said.

The team has more power in the lineup than it has had in past years, Perkins said, and a few utility players offer the Wildkits some versatility.

Other than the pair of seniors, the team is led by sophomore catcher Meg Eisfelder, a huge asset behind the plate and at the plate as the leadoff hitter. Junior Katie Parcell has come off the bench and contributed a grand slam this season. Grace Elwood, a sophomore pitcher, has pitched a majority of the games.

It's just about getting back to the basics and fundamentals of the game, whether that's the mental side or physical side, according to Perkins.

The Wildkits suffered their first Central Suburban South loss to New Trier, 13-2, on Tuesday, April 19. Maybe it was a wake-up call, because Perkins noticed how well her team practiced the very next day. Then the Wildkits came out the day after that and beat Maine South 3-2.

That week was a big turnaround when the Wildkits raised their own expectations, Perkins said.

"There was something that sparked in that Wednesday practice," Perkins said.

It sparked Evanston to a six-game win streak to close out the month of April.

"We're just taught to expect a win," Managlia said. "To expect that we're going to hit the ball and make the play."

*Heather Rule is a freelance reporter for Pioneer Press.*

*Twitter @hrrule*

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