

Red Wolves Baseball Renaissance: New coach, new field, new hope

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SPORTS EDITOR

Arkansas State baseball in 2024 was in trouble. After a hot 8-0 start, the Red Wolves crashed and burned, only winning seven conference games, finishing dead last in the Sun Belt Conference and missing the conference tournament for the third year in a row. Head coach Tommy Raffo was fired at the conclusion of his 16th season with the Red Wolves. Feelings on the program's outlook were not great.

Unlike football and basketball, the Sun Belt Conference is a fairly powerful conference in baseball. Last season, four Sun Belt programs went to the NCAA Tournament, placing them fourth amongst 30 conferences represented in the tournament. In fact, the Sun Belt regularly sends multiple teams to the tournament. The first (and last) time Arkansas State made the

are the top dogs of the Sun Belt. But Old Dominion, who finished the season right smack in the middle of the Sun Belt, pays their coach Chris Finwood an annual salary of \$210,390. How much did Arkansas State elect to pay the guy running their baseball program last season? In 2024, Raffo signed a contract extension that would see him make an annual salary of \$77,000.

Fans of the Red Wolves were down on the team as well. Attendance became minimal by the end of the season.

Caleb White, a sophomore creative media production major from Mount Ida, Arkansas, is a fan of the Red Wolves baseball team and attended several games last season. "I thought they performed poorly, but I really don't think there was much to work with," White said. "I didn't really have a lot of expectations for them to do anything." The pessimism may have

of the Southland Conference, only the conference champion gets to go to the playoffs.

When Coach Silva took over, the Colonels went 26-25, and 12-12 in conference play. But for the next two seasons, the Colonels dominated the Southland Conference, winning two conference championships in a row in the 2024 tournament. In the NCAA playoffs, the Colonels took the 24th-ranked UC-Irvine Anteaters to extra innings before ultimately losing.

Now, Silva will be looking to right the ship at Arkansas State. He'll have a long road to travel, though. The Red Wolves have not had a winning record since 2017, and even that record was 28-27. The Red Wolves highest finish since 1994 was in 2012, when they finished 34-23 and second in the Sun Belt.

"There's always a learning curve, but there's a learning curve for my guys I brought with me from my previous school," Silva said. "It's a different place, different expectations, different league. But there's a lot of similarities."

Coming to Jonesboro with Silva is 31 new players, including six players from Nicholls State.

"It's a big responsibility, and there's a lot to take on when you come in, but for the most part, you really just stick to working hard and showing up every day and stacking days together," catcher Kaden Admundson said.

Admundson, a health studies major from Otsego, Minnesota, is one of the six players who traveled with Coach Silva to Jonesboro.

"I didn't try to talk those guys into coming here, that was mostly initiated by them," Silva said. "I hold my guys to a really high standard, and so for them to want more of that, it's a powerful thing. It means you're doing things the right way."

The Red Wolves will see 17 players returning from last season, including several senior and graduate players.

"Guys like the Wil French's

and the Cason Tollett's, we expect these guys to be good," Silva said. "We've got really good young arms with a chance to not only play at a

A-State will have a brand new turf field named Slayton Family Field. The improvements will be part of a series of improvements that the athletic department

of his predecessor. His contract also states that should the administration not have a new turf field installed by the 2025 season, the damages he will have



Photo by Abigail Leggett | Staff Photographer

The Red Wolves baseball team celebrates a good play.



Photo by Abigail Leggett | Staff Photographer

Infielder Raul Torres runs the bases during practice.

NCAA tournament was in 1994.

In 2024, the Louisiana Ragin Cajuns won the Sun Belt. Their coach, Matt Deggs, makes an annual salary of \$350,000. The new head coach of the Coastal Carolina Chanticleers, a perennial college baseball powerhouse and the 2016 College World Series Champions, has an annual salary of \$367,500. And those

changed, however, after the hiring of a new head coach, Mike Silva. Silva was hired in June after coaching for three seasons with the Nicholls State Colonels.

Silva made some waves in the college baseball world during his tenure with the Colonels. Before his hiring, Nicholls State last appeared in the NCAA playoffs in 1998. Since Nicholls State is a member

high level in our league, but will be putting into place.

Several returning players noted a change in the workload they took on under Silva.

"I think we're attacking every day. We're getting after it in the weight room," Cason Tollett, a finance graduate from Little Rock and first baseman, said.

"That's the biggest difference that I've seen so far, is just showing up every day and putting in the work in the weight room and then coming out on the field and doing the same thing."

French, a senior agricultural business major from Jonesboro, said he had a positive view on the staff changes and the outlook of the team.

"I think it's pretty good. They got everyone going after it," French said. "It's new intensity, and a new level of competition this year, it's a lot better."

This year, the Red Wolves will also start to improve their facilities.

By the upcoming 2025 season,

to pay if he resigns in his first or second season will be cut in



Photo by Abigail Leggett | Staff Photographer

Pitcher Gavin Galy takes practice pitches on the mound.

for that," Silva said. "Some people act like I showed up and all of a sudden the field was changing. Our administration was already deep into that stuff before I got there."

Silva's contract states he will receive an annual salary of \$180,000, more than twice that

half. These also apply if there are not "significant improvements" upon the practice facilities.

"Why this job? This is a baseball community. They love baseball," Silva said.

"This area loves baseball. And that is why this job was attractive to me."

Pinion, Marshall, and Julien zip the Red Wolves to OT victory

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In their first game of the season, the Arkansas State Red Wolves lived up to all the preseason hype, defeating the Akron Zips in overtime 80-75.

The Red Wolves were picked as the favorites to win the Sun Belt Conference and advance to the NCAA Tournament in March. They also entered the game with the most efficient offense in the SBC. Akron finished last season as Mid-American Conference champions, and are the favorite to win the MAC again this season.

"I'm extremely proud of our team," head coach Brian Hodgson said. "The rest of college basketball is playing

cupcake games today and making everybody feel good, where we get Akron who's coming off of an NCAA Tournament and sending a kid to the NBA."

Point guard Terrance Ford Jr. made his first start in nearly two years in this game, and would lead the team in assists with 5. Forward Rashaud Marshall also returned for the Red Wolves to play at center after missing the exhibition game against Trevecca Nazarene to deal with family matters. Marshall was filling the role usually taken by forward Izaiyah Nelson, who is out with a foot injury.

A-State took a decent sized lead in the first half of play. Forward Kobe Julien led the way for the Red Wolves in scoring in the first half, including an early

three-pointer and a fantastic dunk late in the half. The Zips were able to keep the game competitive thanks to guards Isaiah Gray and Sharron Young. By the end of the first half, the Red Wolves led Akron 40-30.

Marshall managed to tie the game by the end of regulation, with a score of . Guard Joseph Pinion proved to be a major threat from the three-point line, going 4-for-5, and by the end of the night led the Red Wolves in scoring. On one of the final plays of regulation, Terrance Ford hit a seemingly game-winning jumper, but upon review it was found to be a shot clock

violation and did not count, so the game went to overtime.

The Red Wolves defense allowed just one goal from the field. A-State meanwhile scored 8 points in overtime to secure their first victory.

Pinion led the team in points with 16. Guard Derrian Ford was second in points, scoring 15 points. Marshall had a great game at center, scoring 4 points, leading the team in rebounds with 10, and getting 2 blocks. Marshall also received the Hard Hat Player award. Julien got 2 blocks as well, and scored 14 points.

"I think the biggest lesson we learned from this game is to stay ready," Hodgson said. "I didn't play Joseph Pinion for the first 16 minutes. I thought he was



Photo by Ibuki Hinohara

F Josh Hill makes a slam dunk against Akron.

just okay his last couple of days of practice, but the last couple of days of practice he really locked in. A lot of guys in that time, in

16 minutes will shut it down mentally, emotionally, physically, and he came in and helped us win a basketball game."s.