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Portsmouth, Rye chase district title

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Kobie Taylor of Portsmouth Little League's 9-10 All-Star team slides home safely during a District II game last summer. Portsmouth and Rye kick off 11-12 district play on Wednesday in Rye.

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The boys of summer return on Wednesday, as the District II 11- and 12-year old Little League All-Star tournament begins, and the watch will be out to see if anybody can knock Portsmouth off the top of the mountain.

Portsmouth has dominated District II recently, going undefeated in district competition the past three seasons. The memorable summer of 2006 put the Port City in the spotlight when the team reached the U.S. semifinals at the Little League World Series. It followed that by winning the New Hampshire state championship in 2007, and fell to Manchester North in last year's state championship series.

There will be no returning players for Portsmouth when it begins districts at Rye on Wednesday, but there is quite a pedigree for success. Tim Berky returns for his fourth stint as the coach. Besides last year, Berky coached the 2004 team to a state title.

"It should be more of the same. We have an outstanding feeder program all the way from the AAA level, so these kids have been coached well," Berky said. "We expect to be tough. We have decent pitchers and we hit the ball."

The roster of 14 includes one 11-year old, Lucas Hartmann, and plenty of pitching. Jake Becker, Richard Riley, Mikel Toar, Connor Monaghan, Justis Mattis and Tim Battye all should see time on the hill.

"They're the most experienced pitchers we have in our league," Berky said. "I trust my staff, but we need the defense to come through and back the pitchers up. If we play solid defense and don't make any errors, we should do OK."

Berky likes the make up of his lineup, led by Riley.

"We don't have many home run hitters, but we have a lot of line-drive hitters that will put the ball in play," Berky said.

It'll be imperative for Portsmouth to get off to a fast start this year in round-robin play, since there are two

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fewer teams to compete against. Belmont and Gifford are no longer on the schedule, which leaves Portsmouth with four opponents. After Rye, it has three home games at Plains Field against Dover, Somersworth and Laconia.

"It's short and you have to develop quickly," Berky said. "If you lose one, you're on the bubble, and if you lose two, you're out."

Portsmouth hosts this year best-of-three District II championship series, which starts on July 18. The two teams with the best records after round-robin play will compete for the title.

The winner of that series will advance to the best-of-three state championship series against the District I champion. The state championship series will begin in Windham on July 25.

Rye was the last team other than Portsmouth to win the District II championship, which it did in 2005. After battling Portsmouth on Wednesday, Rye travels to Somersworth on Saturday, and plays Laconia and Dover.

Coach Ron King coached virtually the same group of kids through 9- and 10-year-old play, and is excited with his team's prospects.


"I think we've got a really good group this year. We've got deep pitching and good hitting, which is big because Rye hasn't been a strong hitting club in the past," King said. "Our goals are (like) anyone else's, to make the district series. We know Portsmouth will be strong again; they've got some big arms and bats."

Carter Madden, Owen Schepcaro and Carter King headline Rye's pitching staff. Ron King said that Schepcaro and Madden are hard throwers, while Carter King is a left-hander who'll provide a different look.

King doesn't expect his team to hit for a lot of power, but said Schepcaro can go deep, as he hit 12 home runs during the regular season. Charlie Kendall will give Rye speed at the top of the lineup.

"We don't have a lot of big bats but the boys can hit the ball hard and get a lot of doubles," King said. "Charlie can beat out a ground ball in the infield four-out-of-five times.

"We're feeling good a hopefully we can win some games," King added.



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