

Willowbrook coaches take girls flag football to national stage

By DAVE OBERHELMAN
doberhelman@dailyherald.com

In on the ground floor of suburban high school girls flag football, Willowbrook co-head coaches Rachel Karos and Nick Hildreth are onto the national stage.

They coached some of the top girls in the nation June 18-21 at the USA Football National Team Development Program Select Bowl in Los Angeles.

"Since starting flag football, for both of us it's been like one exciting thing after another," Karos said.

Karos worked with girls in the 12-and-under Team Development Program. Hildreth worked with 14U players.

A year after the Chicago Bears helped the Chicago Public League spark girls flag football in 2021, the Willowbrook program was among 109 teams statewide.

Willowbrook won the 2022 state title under Illinois High School Association emerging sport status and finished third in the state in 2023. Last fall, Willowbrook reached the quarterfinals in the first IHSA state series in which 154 teams participated.

Tracie Henry, the IHSA assistant executive director in charge of girls flag football, expects 46 more teams this fall.

"We've seen some great talent in Illinois. We're going to see some great talent out there," Karos said of the Select Bowl. "I think it's going to be equally a learning experience as well as an opportunity to show our skills."

Players chosen from Talent ID camps across the country were invited to fill four teams apiece, boys and girls, in 12U, 14U and 16U, plus four teams for 18U girls and women 23-and-under.

They participated in competitions, team practices, team building and meetings, play and strategy walk-throughs and off-the-field sessions such as offsea-



Photo provided by Joe Pearson

Willowbrook girls flag football co-head coaches Nick Hildreth and Rachel Karos served as coaches June 18-21 for USA Football's Girls National Team Development Program Select Bowl in Los Angeles. They are shown after Willowbrook's third-place state finish in 2023.

son training and mental performance.

"It's kind of a segue or pathway for players looking to do USA National teams," Karos said.

Hildreth and Karos, who also coach Willowbrook softball together, had attended USA Football events in the

past, but their first official duty came at a Talent ID camp last winter at the Sport Zone Dome in Aurora.

While they were there, they were being evaluated by USA Football. They passed muster, proved by the congratulatory emails both received May 19 ask-

ing them to work with the girls in Los Angeles.

"It's just exciting," said Hildreth, a 2000 Willowbrook graduate who also is the Warriors varsity boys football coach.

Hildreth was a receiver in his playing days. Upon graduating from Lake Forest College in 2005, he owned Foresters records for receptions and reception yardage.

"Talking with coach Karos before, it's been a blur, multiple years of opportunities that this has presented," Hildreth said. "Really, I'm just excited that a bunch of these athletes are getting opportunities to be on a big stage, a major stage."

A three-sport athlete at Naperville North (Class of 2001), Karos plays with the Chicago Metropolitan Sports Association's Chicago Surge women's flag football team.

She also is a quarterback for the Chicago Winds of the Women's National Football Conference. The Winds are Chicago's first entry in women's tackle football since the Chicago Force ended in 2017.

"Since I've coached football, I feel like I haven't been able to get enough football," she said.

Such statements about what Hildreth called "the greatest game in the world" are why he is excited about girls flag football in general and specifically the USA Football assignment.

"For these girls to get these opportunities – and some of the best football players that I've coached have been females – and for my daughter [Florence] to get to look up to a group of girls in the community and then at the national level, it's something that didn't exist for coach Karos, it didn't exist for my wife [former Willowbrook softball ace pitcher Abbie Coppersmith], even though they're great athletes," he said.

"And it comes for these girls."

2025 Suburban Life All-Area Softball team

By JOSHUA WELGE
jwelge@shawmedia.com

Here is the 2025 Suburban Life All-Area Softball team.

Ainsley Bobroff, Glenbard West, senior, second base: Bobroff batted .460 with a .491 on-base percentage, .990 slugging percentage and 1.481 OPS with 46 hits, seven doubles, two triples, 14 homers, 41 RBIs and 38 runs scored. Fielded at a .955 percentage with just four errors. Class 4A Second Team All-State.

Claire Bolda, Glenbard East, sophomore, pitcher: Upstate Eight Conference Pitcher of the Year posted a 14-4 record with a 1.13 ERA and 200 strikeouts over 111 innings. Class 4A Third Team All-State pick.

Lilly Burda, York, junior, shortstop: Three-time All-State pick and a Class 4A Third Teamer this season, Burda batted .426 with 11 doubles, two triples, four homers, 28 runs scored and 26 RBIs for regional champion. She posted a .981 fielding percentage.

Becca Chaney, Wheaton Warrenville South, junior, shortstop: Tigers' team MVP and unanimous all-conference pick in the DuKane Conference batted .443 with a .476 on-base percentage, with 43 hits, nine doubles, two triples, five homers, 26 runs scored and 28 RBIs. Posted a .965 fielding percentage with over 100 chances.

Reagan Crosthwaite, Wheaton North, senior, shortstop: Suburban Life Softball

Player of the Year and Brown commit batted .424 with .531 on-base percentage and .990 slugging percentage. Crosthwaite had 42 hits, including 10 doubles and 15 home runs, 42 RBIs and 38 runs scored. Fielded at a .947 percentage with only seven errors. Class 4A First Team All-State pick led Falcons to second straight sectional final. Holds Wheaton North's career and single-season records for home runs and RBIs.

Kat Filkowski, Montini, senior, second base: Class 3A Second Team All-State pick led Lady Broncos to sectional title. Filkowski batted .476 with a .522 on-base percentage and .710 slugging percentage, with 59 hits, 13 doubles, five triples, two homers, 44 runs scored and 22 RBIs. Posted .932 fielding percentage at second base.

Lauren Kennedy, St. Francis, junior, shortstop: Louisville recruit batted .500 with 44 runs scored, 37 hits, 10 doubles, five homers, 20 RBIs and 15 stolen bases in leading St. Francis to 23-5 record, a division championship in the Catholic League and sectional final. Class 3A Second Team All-State pick.

Sam Lehnherr, Downers Grove North, senior, second base: Class 4A Third Team All-State pick batted .391 with a .436 on-base percentage. Lehnherr had 11 doubles, three triples, one homer, 22 RBIs and 19 runs scored for West Suburban Silver champs and sectional finalists.

Natalie Pacyga, Lemont, senior, third

base/shortstop: Western Illinois recruit batted .518 with a .534 on-base percentage and .893 slugging percentage. Pacyga had 58 hits, 24 doubles, three triples, four homers, 59 RBIs and 37 runs scored. Fielded at a .949 percentage. Class 3A First Team All-State pick.

Sophia Rosner, Benet, sophomore, pitcher/utility: Two-way threat batted .442 with 13 doubles, six homers and 32 RBIs. Rosner also posted 8-7 record in the circle with a 1.47 ERA and 121 strikeouts over 104½ innings pitched with a .186 opponents batting average. All-conference and third team All-State.

Sonia Ruchala, Willowbrook, senior, infielder: Indiana University-Indianapolis commit returned from a broken tibia and ankle injury that cost her most of her junior season to bat .511 with a .583 on-base percentage and 1.55 OPS, with nine home runs, 44 RBIs and 32 runs scored. Two-time All-State pick was a Class 3A Third Team All-Stater.

Lexi Russ, IC Catholic Prep, sophomore, infielder: Russ broke IC Catholic's single-season RBI record with 61 while hitting .443 with 51 hits and 14 doubles. Class 2A Second Team All-State pick led Knights to sectional title.

Presley Wright, Wheaton Warrenville South, senior, pitcher: All-conference pitcher made a huge jump in her first season as Tigers' ace with two 1-0 shutouts of Wheaton North and a shutout of Lake Park. Wright allowed zero earned

runs in the regional final. Keiser University commit posted a 16-6 record with a 1.64 ERA and 161 strikeouts over 141 innings.

Hannah Wulf, Wheaton North, junior, pitcher: South Carolina recruit posted 16-5 record with 0.97 ERA, 142 strikeouts and .176 batting average against over 137½ innings in helping lead Falcons to second consecutive sectional final. Class 4A Second Team All-State selection.

Honorable Mention

Ella Bonk, Downers Grove North, junior, outfielder; Kayla Buckets-Meen, Hinsdale South, senior, outfielder; Sofia Bucaro, IC Catholic Prep, junior, outfielder; Kelly Cahill, IC Catholic Prep, sophomore, catcher; Lilly Carver, Glenbard East, sophomore, shortstop; Abby Del Preto, Wheaton North, senior, infielder; Ashlynn Durkin, Downers Grove North, senior, pitcher; Ava Jacklin, Lyons, junior, shortstop; Kennedy Joe, Nazareth, senior, center fielder; Abby Mease, Wheaton Warrenville South, senior, center fielder; Mia Melendez, Riverside-Brookfield, freshman, infielder; Jacklyn Meyers, Downers Grove South, junior, infielder/outfielder; Aubry Raffan, Montini, sophomore, first base; Lainie Rosner, Benet, sophomore, catcher; Annabella Rychetsky, Nazareth, senior, pitcher; Megan Stieglitz, Glenbard West, senior, outfielder.



Welcome to the eNewspaper

Available by 5:00am Thursdays