The T-Birds softball team finished the season 6-14, and didn’t make the playoffs, but Head Coach Jason Evans is already looking ahead toward next year and the potential on his roster.

“I think the core of the team that’s coming back, we’ve already been through it now. Now they’re going to be hungry, they’re going to want it more,” Evans said.

Throughout this season, it was clear to Evans that the team always had the talent to go far. But for whatever reason, different challenges kept getting in the way of the Thunderbirds.

“This is the first year I’ve had a losing record. It’s been frustrating on my part,” Evans said. “You always self-reflect and think, ‘What can I do?’ I found that I needed to get back to the fundamentals. That helped us toward the end. We battled a lot more.”

Despite the moments during the season where Highline struggled, Evans said there was always a chance for the T-Birds to be in any game in they played. All the team needed to do was capitalize on opportunities.

“Our runs batted in were not good, we did well when nobody was on base,” Evans said. “We got a lot of people on base but that’s where it ended. When you leave 10 to 12 runners in scoring position, that definitely could have made a difference.”

Additionally, one of the things that Evans pinpointed as a difficulty throughout the year for the T-Birds was the amount of transitioning that had to happen for freshman players from high school to college.

“Two sophomores and 11 freshman, that’s a little rough,” Evans said. “It’s a little more intense for college, the travel, you play four or six games in two days and that’s a lot.”

Evans said that the players returning next year will be better prepared to handle the demands of playing in a college softball environment.

“8 out of the 10 freshman aren’t used to a weightlifting program. Now they’re expecting it,” Evans said. “They [the players returning] all want more. They told me they’re going to lift and hit during the summer time.”

Along with the growth and learning experiences also came some highlights.

After losing the first game against one of the best teams in the NWAC, Columbia Basin, on March 12 in a two-game series, Highline bounced back and showed their potential.

“In the first game against CBC we left 13 players in scoring positions,” Evans said. “We had a ‘coming to Jesus’ moment and we beat them [in the next game] 12-6. It shows me the talent we have and it shines here and there.”

Evans also saw a lot of perseverance in his team throughout the season, giving the example of a 10-9 loss against Pierce on April 30 where his team continued to fight through 12 innings.

“The game at the end of regulation was 6-6, that went back and forth and someone [from Pierce] broke out and won it,” Evans said. “For the girls to be in the battle-competitive mode in a three-hour game, that showed me exactly what we had on the team.”

Evans said that the returning women on the roster know that the team has to capture the spark provided by its talent and run with it.

“Knowing that we can bring that every game next year, that was fun knowing that as a coach,” Evans said. “We just need to get there mentally.”

Looking back on the season, Evans and the team also had to cope with a new playoff format set by the NWAC, where instead of a sweet 16 playoff tournament, where four teams from each division were eligible, this season only the top two teams could participate.

“This is the first year in six years where we didn’t go to the postseason,” Evans said.

Along with his returning roster, Evans is confident in the new recruits being added to the team.

“We’ve always had limited pitching, only four girls this year could pitch for us,” Evans said. “[We have] two this year [recruited], one is an everyday second baseman and outfielder. Knowing she can eat up innings and play for us is self assuring.

“We’ve got some good hitting players coming in, and the players we have returning.”

Evans said that the team is not finished with recruiting yet, and the team is hoping to add another three to five players to the roster.

Not only are 10 players returning from this year’s roster, all are fully committed to softball, and will not play other sports.

“We’re going to have players that are more ready to be leaders on the team,” Evans said. “This year we were more limited with them. Ten or 11 freshman had to run it. This year with softball only, there’s going to be 10 leaders out there showing the freshman what we believe in, the way we run ourselves.”

Even with the current smaller pool of recruits for two-year colleges such as Highline, Evans said that the school is still an attractive destination for student athletes.

“We try to push graduation rates of our athletes, getting an AA, higher rates of athletes graduating with an AA on time,” Evans said. “The upper administration pushing that academic portion. That’s a big thing that parents like to hear.”

Evans also said that the facilities and staff for the T-Birds draws in recruits.

“Our facilities, that’s a big selling point,” Evans said. “Our staff is getting well known, which helps a lot, we’ve been perennially in the mix [as a program].”

The Thunderbirds have the pieces set in place, the talent, and the confidence from their head coach that could set them up for a stronger bounce back year. Evans said that this past season has been a good year for the program to reflect.

“I think this year as a whole was a whole was our step back, deep breath kind of moment,” Evans said. “I think we’ll come in hungry and relaxed. A team that’s going to say ‘We’re going to make this happen’, not be on our heels so much, more aggressive.

“We talked a lot this year, we have to walk on the field and take it and leave.”