

North Star League Batter's Box



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Breakout Stars of 2021



Tyler Schiller (Hutchinson) - .371 Batting Average, 26 hits, 7 Doubles, 18 RBI, 22 runs

Will we see much of Schiller in 2022? He had a great freshman season at St. Cloud State followed up with a big summer in the North

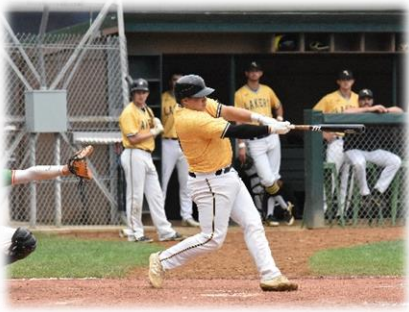
Star League and was tough to keep in the ballpark during Region 12C play. The Northwoods League or others might be calling if he has another great year with the Black and Red Huskies. Schiller worked his way in to the middle of the order and took a lot of weight off of Wendland's shoulders as he (Wendland) worked his way back from a 2020 injury. Not only is Schiller a stud at the plate, but a fast and smooth leftfielder with a great arm. Hutch has produced another great one, let's hope to see him around for the long run.

Keenan Hodgkin (Loretto) - .419 Batting Average (6th place), 26 hits, 18 RBI, 5 HR's
Though Hodgkin has been with the Larks for a few years, he started to put it all together in 2021 hitting right in the middle of young potent Loretto lineup, finishing in the top 10 in the league in batting. The Larks finished tied for second place and won the region thanks in large part to the damage Hodgkin did. His hot second half of the season rolled right in to playoffs with the Larks going 15-5 in the regular season and 4-1 in Region 12C play. He also gave the Larks 9.33 innings on the mound striking out 13 with a 1.93 ERA, while being a great third basemen.

Ben Clapp (Maple Lake) - .350 Batting Average, 21 hits

Clapp is another one who we are just scratching the surface with. I don't even think he's allowed to legally have a shoe beer yet. The young Clapp was hitting right in the middle of a very solid Laker lineup this summer, hitting for a high average and showing some pop in his bat. Not to mention he looks like a Maple Lake Laker, he's

just missing the mustache. He's a big strong kid



who does not get cheated at the plate. Clapp came in to the Laker organization as a catcher, but has made a nice transition over

to third base, and gained a great deal of experience as the Lakers made it to the round of 16 at state.

Alan Pietila (Cokato) - *.400 Batting Average (7th place), 28 hits, 16 runs*

The Kernels found a solid young hitter with a great deal of versatility who can also log some innings on the mound, either as a guy who can come in at the end of the game or make spot starts on occasion like he had to in this year's league playoffs. He logged 17 innings, with a 2.65 ERA with 24 strikeouts. Pietila had the 7th best batting average in the league, and he and Isaac Nelson gave Cokato a solid combo in the middle of their lineup as two guys that they can continue to build around.

Ben Luethner (Loretto) - *.382 Batting Average, 29 hits, 13 RBI*

When Brandon Scanlon retired from the Larks, he left a huge hole to fill. Not only in the leadoff spot, but also with all that ground to cover in Centerfield at Arnold Klaers Field. Loretto looks to have filled that void with Ben Luethner. (And no, I'm not comparing him Scanlon just yet, we have a long way to go to fill those shoes) But Luethner gives Loretto a great deal of speed, and pop at the top of its lineup and someone who can cover the gaps in the outfield. It also moves Tyler Maher back to his natural position in right field, and Bradley Koskie back to first base, vastly improving the Loretto defense. Having a true

leadoff man also proved integral as the Larks got back to state for the first the time since 2016.

Noah Christenson (Buffalo) - *.378 Batting Average, 31 hits, 19 RBI – 1.23 ERA, 14.67 IP, 20 K's*

Christenson not only plays a nice short stop for the Bulldogs with a rocket arm, he came in to close several games for Buffalo averaging over a strikeout an inning. Both would be more than enough to make him a breakout player in our league, but he is a tough out in the always dangerous Buffalo lineup. Christenson gave manager Corey Braun a great deal of options on where to hit him in the batting order. He's able to handle the bat well, and would often times find himself in the two spot after Colton Haight or bringing up the back end of the middle of the order after the Duske/O'Donnell combo.

Bradley Koskie (Loretto) - *.328 Batting Average, 23 hits, 13 RBI*

Bradley has turned himself in to a staple in the Larks lineup and gives them a ton of athleticism at first base. Showed some signs of power and



able to work the right field line and use his speed to wreak havoc on the bases. A mixture of Koskie, Hodgkin, and Luethner at the top of the Lark lineup will serve very daunting in the near future.

Noah Bush (Howard Lake) - *.328 Batting Average, 20 hits, 16 RBI, 16 runs*

Bush is another one who might be an NSL short timer, for at least the foreseeable future. Minnesota's Mr. Baseball is off to college at a school in Iowa that continuously pumps out Division I, and professional players. Bush logged 21 innings on the mound for the Orphans striking out an astonishing 38 batters. He also did some damage as a leadoff hitter with 3 homeruns, 5

doubles, and 2 triples in 61 at bats in 2021. We hope to see Noah back in 2021 tearing up the league, but if he's not, we'll all understand why. He has about as much raw ability as you'll find in an 18-year-old kid, but shows great composure, and leadership ability.



Nick Kaye (Loretto) – 3-1, 32.67 Innings, 33 K's, 2.2.0 ERA
Another Lark makes the list, but deservedly so, as Kaye burst on to the scene playing first base for the Larks in

the shortened 2020 season and got most of his playing time in 2021 on the mound. He served a tough 1-2 combination with Colton Petron which helped Loretto finish tied for second place in the regular season and champions of Region 12C.

Ben Rielley (Maple Lake) - .306 Batting Average, 19 hits, 22 RBI

Rielley had a good year at the plate for the Lakers and gave them some needed depth in the outfield as we've seen Riley Decker transition to more of an infielder the past couple of seasons. We really got to know Rielley better in the state



tournament as he started all three games for the Lakers and picked up the first two wins defeating the Milroy Irish 4-0, and the 2019 State Champion Jordan Brewers

4-0. Rielley threw 21 innings for the Lakers this past summer, and had a 2-1 record with 35 K's with a 4.50 ERA. He's going to help solidify the Laker rotation in the future which is looking like

it could have a lot of depth with Malachek, Mergen, Wolff, Goelz, and Rielley. I won't be surprised to see them back at the top spot of the league very soon.

Becoming Household Names

Joey Hyde, Cody Klabunde, and Andrew Loch all had big seasons helping the **Litchfield Blues** break through this season as they got themselves in to Region playoffs without doing it the hard way. Hyde went 7-2 on the mound in 69 innings of work (Both leagues best) with an ERA of 3.52, including a huge regular season win against Buffalo, and he almost shut down the league's best lineup again in the playoffs, as the Blues came up a little short in August. The trouble that Litchfield had its first couple of years in the league was they couldn't score any runs. Klabunde and Loch hit .361, and .357 respectively while tallying 56 hits combine.

Buffalo's John Weber, finished the season with the league's lowest ERA at 1.54, while going 4-2



on the mound striking out 42 in 35 innings, second on the team to Jon Euerle's 41 innings pitched. The

Bulldogs have a lot of depth in the pitching department and spread their innings out pretty equally; but look to see Weber's innings continue to climb in the future as he continues to dominate. **Howard Lake's** roster has been completely overhauled from the Mike Gagnon days, and the Orphans have some bright young players in the league. One who has solidified himself as a mainstay is **Brad Bickmann**, who hit over .300 and played a great third base defensively the past few seasons including a .342 batting average in 2021 with 25 hits, 16 runs



scored, and 3 triples. The loss of KC Johnson and Billy Soule will sting for **Maple Plain** for a

while, but they had a few guys come out of their shell in 2021 with leadoff man and catcher **TJ Carlson** hitting .343, with 24 hits, and 14 RBI, and outfielder **Tommy Traen** at .377, 26 hits and 12 runs. These two helped get Maple Plain in the playoffs and took Loretto to extra innings in its elimination game in regions. The Diamond Devils have also found a workhorse to lead their rotation in **Kyle Bode**. Bode threw 56.33 innings this summer, while striking out 45 and would have surely been a nice draft asset to state team had availability worked out. **Dassel-Cokato's Tyler Brandel** has been around long enough and hit the ball over the fence enough that you know who is playing short and hitting in the middle of the lineup when you show up at Saints Field. Brandel provides D-C with much needed offense and did so again in 2021 with a .314 average, driving in 21 runs, and hitting 3 homeruns. Finally, **Matt Piechowski** of **Hutchinson** has put together a few good seasons which seem to fly under the radar with the big boppers we're used to seeing from the Huskies. Piechowski was a great leadoff man for Hutch this summer as he hit .359, with 28 hits, and scored 26 runs (4th in the league).

Future Studs: If you don't know them, you will soon.



Avery Liestman (Litchfield) – Started second playoff game for Litchfield after pitching for legion team all summer. Can

play an above average third with a great arm, and hit .308 (8-26) this summer with the Blues. Could pose a great 1-2 punch with Hyde for Litch. Liestman will be a freshman on the baseball team at Itasca Community College in 2022. #GoVikings

Jacob Niemela (Dassel-Cokato) – Niemela, who was a Minnesota Lions All-Star got his feet wet this summer logging 24 innings on the mound for the Saints, and tallying 51 at bats. Saints are hoping to get more out of Jacob in the future to aid much needed help to the pitching staff. He's playing college baseball at Brunswick Community College in North Carolina. They take baseball very serious in that part of the country, so hoping to see some big things from Niemela in the future. #GoDolphins

Oran Hinkle (Delano) – Hinkle won't graduate high school until 2022, and hasn't decided on a college at the moment, but he was hitting right in the middle of Delano's lineup since the Fourth of July. He wasn't intimidated by North Star League pitching and has some speed on the base paths. Hinkle plays mainly infield, but might be a better outfield fit for the Athletics in the future. #GoTigers

Josh Koskie (Loretto) – Koskie came on to the scene late this summer, but made an impact in the playoffs for the Larks picking up a huge win on the mound in the Region semifinals



against Hutchinson. Koskie is more of a middle infielder however by trade, and hits from the left side like the rest of the family. He'll be a big influence on the young up and coming Larks. Josh will play his freshman year, 2022, at Augustana University. #GoVikings

Justin Johnson (Buffalo) – Buffalo's Legion team plays about 8 games a week, so we didn't see much of Johnson until the end of the season. He popped out to me as he hit a homerun in a Legion Sub-State game during the day, and followed it up with a Town Team homerun for the Bulldogs that night. He'll give Buffalo a great option at catcher as they started to transition Colton Haight to the outfield, and he can clearly hit! Johnson will play his freshman college baseball season in 2022 for Dakota County Technical College. #GoBlueKnights

Ethan Hansen (Buffalo) – Hansen came in to the summer off of an injury that cost him much of his senior season at



Buffalo High School. Like Johnson, he played for Buffalo's Legion team so we didn't see him much until late July, and early August. Got some major playing time for the Bulldogs though in 2020 and looks like pitching will be young Ethan's future as he will be a freshman on the St. Cloud State baseball team in 2022. He might fall in line with many other SCSU players, where we don't see them at the town ball level in the summertime. #GoHuskies

Leighton "Bat Boy" Kutter (Hutchinson) – Bat Boy had a breakdown out year in the Hutchinson Youth Baseball Association Summer League hitting .548 with 17 homeruns, 31 doubles, and drove in 59 runs. After spending the winter working on changing his launch and doing Hot Yoga, he was able to increase his bat speed and had four of the top five exit velocity marks in 2021. Kutter is currently uncommitted and may forgo the rest of Elementary, Middle and School and enter the draft in 2022.



Mike Weber (Delano) – Wasn't sure where exactly to put Mike Weber on the list, as he threw less than 20 innings in the regular season going 18.67 with a 2.41 ERA, and an impressive 22 strikeouts.



Weber really broke out in the post season for the Athletics as he picked up all three of their Region wins (3-0, 1.93 ERA, 13 K's) and got a no decision in his start in the State Tournament.

Season Recap:

The North Star League had an epic stretch run with Hutchinson winning the regular season title going 16-4, while Delano, Buffalo, and Loretto finished tied for second place each going 15-5, setting up a solid Region playoff. Delano used the advantage of being the host to win its first three games over Maple Lake, Buffalo, and Hutchinson before falling in the championship game to Loretto. The Larks lost their first one in a burn burner with Howard Lake before winning back to back games in extra innings over Maple Plain and Buffalo to earn a state bid. They weren't done though, as they won their next three over Maple Lake, Hutchinson and Delano gain the number one seed out of Region 12C for the state tournament. Maple Lake came in to the region with a 7-game losing streak. They actually needed a win out of Dassel-Cokato over Maple Plain on the last day of the regular season to avoid the bottom 4 league playoffs. An extra innings loss to Delano in its opening region game put the streak at 8. Maple Lake bounced back and not only saved face for themselves, but for the entire North Star League. The Lakers bats came alive to take down Litchfield and then Howard Lake to earn a bid to state. While Loretto, Delano and Hutchinson all forgot their bats at home during state; Maple Lake rode Ben Reilley and draftee from Buffalo Eric Newman to back to back shutout wins in their first two state tournament games. They defeated the Milroy Irish 4-0 and the 2019 State Champion Jordan Brewers 2-0 before falling to the Alexandria Black Sox 5-2.

MVP-Toby Hanson (Delano)

Toby Hanson wins his second consecutive North Star League MVP, on top of winning the batting title again. Hanson finished 2021 with .465 and led the league with 33 RBI, while finishing with 33

hits, 22 runs, and 7 doubles. Not only was Hanson outstanding at the plate, he ended up being Delano's catcher down the stretch and in the playoffs, which was a big reason why the Athletics



made it back to the state tournament. From 1988-2014 an MVP was given out to a player in each division in

the league. From 1972-1987, and 2015-present day, there has been one MVP each season. Toby Hanson joins Dick Klaers (Loretto, STMA) and Steve Brower (Buffalo/Monticello) as the only players to win multiple MVP's when given out to the leagues sole MVP. Chad Raiche (Maple Lake), and Mike Gagnon (Maple Lake/Howard Lake) both hold the record for most MVP awards with four.

Most Valuable Pitcher-Joey Hyde (Litchfield)

For the second year in a row, the leagues most valuable pitcher comes to us via the Litchfield Blues. Joey Hyde had a stellar year going 7-2 with a 3.52 ERA while tossing 69 innings and striking out 43. Hyde's work on the mound was a big reason that Litchfield got in to the region playoffs as the sixth seed for the first time since they rejoined the North Star League, and he had Litchfield within outs of knocking out Buffalo in the first round. From a historical standpoint, Hyde's 7 wins leaves him 2 short of the NSL record of Delano's Tom Ditty with 9 wins in 1966, and Joe Harmala of D-C who also won 9 in 1969, and 1974.

Manager of the Year-Herb Koch (Loretto)

The Larks were the definition of trusting the process in 2021, and building off a solid finish in 2020. Week in and week out the Larks chipped their way to the top of the standings heading in to the regular season finale before falling to

Hutchinson. Loretto didn't let that stop them from winning 5 in a row after losing it's first region game to claim the Region 12C Championship. Koch stuck with the crop of youngsters in his lineup to get it figured out by the end of the season, and he



was rewarded by getting the Larks back to the state tournament for the first time since 2016. Sticking with guys like Luethner, Hodgkin, and Bradley Koskie hitting in the top and heart of the order proved to be the key

to success on top of making sure his pitching staff wasn't overworked going in to playoffs.