

The North Star League Spectator

2005 League Preview issue

55th Year

West: Monti makes its move

Buffalo Bulldogs

2004 Record: 7-9

Newcomers: None.

A year ago, Buffalo looked every part the up-and-coming team in the West. They had come off a heady sophomore campaign in 2003 with lightning in their bows and a couple new college-experienced pitchers in their quiver.

The Bulldogs didn't quite fulfill that promise, but they're heading into 2005 with similar potential. Unfortunately, the full cast of characters isn't back. Manager Jason Opsal, who brought amateur ball back to Buffalo three years ago, moved out of the area and gives way to new manager Chris Gmach. Buffalo also loses some offense in RBI leader Mike Holman as well as veteran Ramon Vega, who had to hang up his spikes due to injury.

Look for plenty of speed and solid starting pitching from the Bulldogs this season. Led by OF Ben Geelan (.389, 14 R) and P Randy Bethke (4-1, 2.93), this team won't easily be buffaloed. They have unfinished business from last year.

Howard Lake Orphans

2004 Record: 11-5

Newcomers: None.

Howard Lake's pitching has carried this team for many seasons now, but never more than last year. The Orphans' staff, led by Jake Streich, Adam Koch, and Andy Gagnon, ran up a stellar 2.45 team ERA and paced the team to another West title. They're all back in '05, plus Shane Heber.

On the other hand, the young offense stumbled to an anemic .214 batting average. (Good thing the Orphans' hitters didn't have to face the Orphans' pitchers!) The team returns intact, with Jesse Berg and Kevin Werner back to lead the offense, but Howard Lake will need its lineup to mature in a hurry if it hopes to hold off an improved Monticello squad.

1
Extra-base hits of more than two bases Buffalo hit last season

143
League-high strikeouts logged by Orphans' staff last year

Kingston Kings

2004 Record: 0-16

Newcomers: Billy Aho, Nick Forga.

Say this for the Kings: they achieved perfection last year. Their unblemished win column means Kingston almost can't help but improve. The rest of the West won't make it easy, though.

It would be one thing if Kingston needed to fix just one thing (a la Howard Lake), but unfortunately that's not the case. At the plate, the Kings stumbled to a miserable .184 BA and scored just 44 runs all season. That figure didn't mix well with the pitching staff's 6.16 ERA. "No one came up with the big hit [last year]," manager Seth Isaacson said. "Scoring more runs will take some pressure off our pitchers."

The best of Kingston's pitchers last year, Chris Picken (4.06), returns from a broken foot that ended his '04 campaign. Brad Paulson and Brandon Grochow have shown promise but will need to gain consistency this season.

7
Team high in RBIs in 2004 (Brian Dietz)

Monticello Polecats

2004 Record: 10-6

Newcomers: Jason Kennedy, Josh Holthaus, Tony Hoaglund, Dave Burkholder.

The Polecats haven't changed their team colors to maroon and gold yet, but it's the next logical step. Back after a one-year hiatus is Josh Holthaus, who needs no introduction in these parts. As if that weren't big enough, Holthaus brought his former U of M teammate, Jason Kennedy. With all due respect to Howard Lake, we have a new division favorite.

Not that the 'Cats were hurting for offense; they topped the league with 114 runs scored, with division MVP Joe VanCulin (.476, 19 RBI) and Greg Holker (.417, 17 runs) leading the charge. Monti's added dimension last season was a vastly improved pitching staff. Pitcher of the year Matt Loegering (5-1, 1.65) proved the ace Monti had been missing for years. Burkholder is a former NAIA player of the year.

30
Hits by Joe VanCulin in '04

Central: More Athletic than ever

Dassel-Cokato Saints

2004 Record: 13-4

Newcomers: None.

Yawn...another season, another 13-4 record, another berth at state. Wake us when the Saints do something unexpected.

D-C fans had better not fall asleep, because they're in for another summer of excellent ball. The Saints, state quarterfinalists in 2004, lost SS and team RBI leader Justin McKinley to the pro Evansville (Ind.) Otters but otherwise return intact. D-C hopes Pete Burkstrand's arm allows him to fill the open space at short. Dan Birkholz emerged as the team leader at the plate (.426, 5 2B) and on the hill (5-0, 57 Ks, 1.07 ERA). These young, speedy Saints might not be the team to watch if you dig the long ball, but don't expect them to put you to sleep.

1.78

Saints' team ERA in 2004, 0.35 better than '03.

Delano Athletics

2004 Record: 11-6

Newcomers: None.

A quick recap of Delano's 2004 campaign: five-win improvement over '03, 2nd place finish in the Central, elite eight showing at state, first World Series title since 1918, and ending the Curse of the Bambino.

Okay, not quite everything there, but close. The Athletics could hardly have had a better season in 2004. First-year manager Steve Eilen flipped around Delano's 6-11 finish in '03. The difference was pitching—and more than just Jeff Janzen's sensational season (7-2, 1.04 ERA). Delano's staff found young depth in Aaron Swenson (3.76) and Matt Greibel (1.90) as well. If the A's show improvements at the plate, they might plan on a second straight Labor Day weekend lost to baseball.

7

Wins logged by Jeff Janzen last season

Hutchinson Huskies

2004 Record: 8-9

Newcomers: 1B Luke Klitzke, OF Mark Spaude, IF Mike Kutter, P Kevin Kuhl, P/OF Evan Kohli, Util. Andrew Dammann.

The little number in the big box tells the story for Hutch this year. Ace hurler Kyle Messner fought off shoulder problems in 2004, hurling BBs at opponents en route to a tiny ERA and a 1.5-to-1 strikeout-to-IP ratio. Unfortunately for Hutch, Messner could pitch in only a handful of games, and the Huskies stumbled to a season below .500.

0.59

Injured P Kyle Messner's 2004 ERA

Even more unfortunately for Hutch, Messner's 2005 campaign has been lost to shoulder surgery. Does this drive a scalpel through the Huskies chances this year? Manager Lee Kuhl is realistic: "We can't replace Messner, but we'll move on."

Hutch will rely on veteran pitchers Jim Farenbaugh and Mike Marquardt to log quality innings along with young Adam Padnos (1-3, 3.09 in '04). The Huskies have added some speedy new talent that should bring improvements in the field as well. It had better: this team gave up 40 unearned runs in league play, one fewer than Kingston's league-high.

Maple Lake Lakers

2004 Record: 10-7

Newcomers: IF/P Tony Smith.

Nobody exactly knows where "the hump" is located, but we have a hunch it's somewhere outside Maple Lake. Each year, the Lakers look ready to get over the darn thing once and for all, and each year they fall achingly short. 2004 was no exception: they hit well and pitched better than recent years but couldn't make it out of Sections.

Naturally, this looks like they year they'll get over the hump. Maple Lake lost no players and added Tony Smith from Rosen in the Land O'Ducks League. Division MVP SS Chad Raiche (.380, 20 runs, 22 RBIs) is back to lead the offense along with keystone mate Nate Johnson (.426) and OF Todd Fuller (.370). Lakers have fallen prone to late-season slumps, and it's up to pitchers Fuller, Todd DesMarais, Ryan Klingelhofer, and Bobby Fobbe to keep their fire through August. This may be the year.

7

HRs hit by Chad Raiche last year, more than all but two NSL teams

St. Michael Saints

2004 Record: 10-7

Newcomers: P Jesse Scherber

Only in St. Michael could a 10-7 record be a major disappointment, but standards are different there. After finishing strong in 2003, the Saints had big hopes going into last season. Alas, their bats didn't match their hopes. St. Michael's uncharacteristic .251 team batting average tells most of the story. The Saints boasted only one true slugger last year in Chris Volkman (.375, 3 HRs), and his efforts were neutralized by a mysteriously quiet season from '03 division MVP Kyle Krzmarzick. As manager Roger Ketel put it: "We need to improve our offensive production in order to be solid contenders."

The pitching staff will rely mainly on veterans Paul Schumm and Grant Ketel, though it gets added support with newcomer Jesse Scherber. Scherber got a lot of Ks last year with Albertville (44) but not any Ws.

1

Saints hitter (Chris Volkman) who had double-digit RBIs in 2004.

East: Don't doubt the Diamond Devils

Albertville Villains

2004 Record: 6-11

Newcomers: P/OF Josh Juntunen

As long as Todd Klaers is healthy and in the lineup, Albertville will always be respectable. Klaers puts up as much offense by himself as some entire teams do.

Whether the Villains can move beyond respectable is mostly in the hands of the pitching staff. For the first time in the history of the team, P Paul Schumacher did not log the most innings pitched. (That distinction belonged to Jesse Scherber, who reformed himself and became a Saint.) If P Ryan Aaserud can handle an increased workload and P Josh Juntunen holds his own, Albertville can move into the top half of the East. This team tends to go as far as Schumacher can pitch them, and even his arm can't hold up the team by itself.

.500
Todd Klaers's
ridiculous bat-
ting average in
2004

Loretto Larks

2004 Record: 9-8

Newcomers: None.

Loretto will try to build on a very positive 2004 season. After spending a couple years in rebuilding mode, the Larks burst through to become a factor in the East race. As usual, Loretto hopped on the Schutte-Scanlon Express en route to a solid .281 team batting average and 112 runs, second in the NSL to Monticello. Eric Schutte popped three HRs and led the team with 15 RBIs, while Brandon Scanlon batted .361 with 20 runs scored. Look for more of the same in 2005.

Nick Koch emerged as the Larks' go-to pitcher; they continued to go to him game after game. Koch (4-7) recorded the most decisions in the league and probably lost more than his 2.76 ERA should deserve. Much like Albertville, Loretto's fortune rests on whether they can spread their ace's workload.

75
Innings logged
by Nick Koch
in '04, most in
the NSL

Maple Plain Diamond Devils

2004 Record: 12-5

Newcomers: C Brad Mazer

Maple just seems to produce offense these days. Maple bats are the thing to swing, and both Maple Lake and Maple Plain have among the most potent lineups around. The Diamond Devils celebrated their first season with a nickname by tromping through the Eastern division and essentially end-

24
Adam Gregg's
RBI total from
last season

ing the pennant race by June.

A couple of relative newcomers, Adam Gregg and division MVP Andrew Engebretson sparked the Devils' lineup last season. Engebretson batted .358 with three HRs, while Gregg hit .377 with 24 RBIs. Maple Plain veteran Matt Goodwald also hit .319 with 22 runs scored to lead the squad. As if their returns weren't enough, Brad Mazer is back to send his usual tremors up Highway 12.

On the hill, Pat McPherson and Brandon Schlinz formed a strong 1-2 punch, sharing the workload evenly as both finished the year with ERAs under 2.60. This is a remarkably well-balanced C team, and John Timpe's squad is set to make a longer playoff run this season.

Mound Mallards

2004 Record: 9-8

Newcomers: P Luke Ludvicson, P/OF Andy Keding

Few people expected a breakout season from Mound last year, but the element of surprise made it all the more fun.

After seasons of 3, 3, and 5 wins in their first three years in the league, the Mallards almost doubled their win total in 2004. Their effort netted Andy Snyder an NSL co-manager-of-the-year award and set them up for even bigger things in '05. In fact, the Mallards lost no impact players during the offseason.

Joel Utech (5-0) proved to be a front-line starting pitcher, but he got sufficient help from Kyle Krotzer and Steve Heesen as well. On offense, the team hit a respectable .273, led by Peter Harrell (.447) and Peter Sycks (.379). This is a team that should only build on its recent success in the season to come.

7
HRs hit by
Chad Raiche
last year, more
than all but
two NSL teams

Rockford River Bandits

2004 Record: 1-16

Newcomers: Niles Lewin

The River Bandits showed promise during their second season in existence, but they just didn't quite have the ammunition to keep up with the league.

Scott Mauricio proved himself a true offensive threat last season, logging a .403 average with 8 RBIs and a home run. He's back this season, as is Ben Fontana (.283). This duo formed a respectable core for the pitching staff. The return of Niles Lewin will help the offense as well; Lewin is a former league all-star and .300 hitter. If everything falls into place for the River Bandits, a middle-of-the-pack finish is within reach.

6.73
Not the best
team ERA in
the league last
year