

The North Star League

Spectator

That's a Wrap edition

'Cats in pole position**Monticello runs away with East**

Last season, the NSL East came away licking its wounds after a roundly miserable campaign. For the first time in league history, every team in a division finished with a losing record. The league champs went 5-9, fer cryin' out loud! That's not a pennant-winning record...that's a runway model wearing stiletto heels.

So it goes without saying that most East teams set their realistic goal at .500, and any further wins were gravy.

Then there's Monticello, which has begun to break away from the pack. The miserable days, when the Polecats just hoped to put nine players on the field, are not far behind them. But their 10-5 finish, winning the East by three games, sends a firm message to the league that they've arrived, and they intend to stick around.

The Polecats staked a three-game lead early on and never really looked back. Division rivals admitted in June that they were pretty much battling for second place.

The young squad was led this season by David Nelson (.514) and Joe VanCulin (.431, 21 RBI) as they raised their team batting average from .310 to .356. Of course, it's hard to overlook the return of Josh Holthaus in that equation. Holthaus graduated from the U of M and paced the league with a .550 BA, 8 HR, and 20 RBI, falling one ribeye short of a division triple crown.

Does state await? Chances are great.

Saints nearly perfect**St. Michael closes out season of superlatives**

Sometimes a person can judge a masterpiece painting by its every detail—say, a Rembrandt—and recognize why it's a masterpiece. Other times, the devil isn't in the details. A masterpiece by Van Gogh is best observed by taking the whole thing in.

That's the way we'll have to look at St. Michael's 2001 season, because the whole thing was a work of art, but one little detail could spoil the view.

The Saints finished the year with a sparkling 15-1 mark. They were perfect in the Central division and marched through their entire schedule with military precision. League observers noted that this is the sharpest St. Michael has looked since 1997, when they also finished with one loss and went on to win the state Class C title.

The only blemish on the Saints' record came on May 27, when Howard Lake rolled into town and left with a one-run victory in extra innings. The Orphans scored one in the 10th, and St. Michael appeared to tie it up on a close play at the plate. But the umpire said no, and the game was over.

That's why the Saints have to treat that game like a Van Gogh: don't get caught up in the details, because it was the only thing that kept them from an unbeaten season. It's not like they even relied on a break here and a break there. The rest of their summer was a butt-kicking jamboree.

Apparently, going unbeaten in the NSL is sort of like running the board in the NFL. It hasn't happened in 34

years. Looks like it should be possible, but for now, the '67 Loretto Larks remain our version of the '72 Dolphins.

Perhaps most impressive is how St. Michael wasn't likely to put its best product out there this season. They'd be good, sure, but the Saints lost a handful of significant veterans, especially on the hill. Ace Grant Ketel came back, but starters 2 through 4 (Mike Barthel, Rod Litzau, and Paul Schumm) did not. Would this signal the end of an era?

As if. The Saints responded by getting younger, enjoying breakout seasons from Derek Brant (.467) and Chris Volkmann (.413) at the plate while Aaron Cook emerged as a fine #2 starter.

Perhaps the biggest new sparkplug, though, moved to town in time for this season. Kyle Krzmarzick relocated from Sleepy Eye and brought his monstrous bat in tow. Tallying stats of .537, 8 HR, and 39 RBI (new league record), Krzmarzick fell .004—a mere one hit—short of a Central division triple crown.

Of course, Old Reliable was back to his bag of tricks. Ketel had perhaps his best season on the hill, winning 10 games (league record) and giving up just two walks all season—67 innings strong!

One last nugget: the Saints finished with a .385 team batting average, second best in league history. The record? .401, set in 1997. By St. Michael. The last time they won a state title.

Not to draw any conclusions or anything.

League leaders, team statistics

Batting Average

St. Michael385
Maple Lake364

Runs

St. Michael	214
Maple Lake	167

Hits

St. Michael	244
Monticello	209

RBIs

St. Michael	185
Maple Lake	155

Doubles

St. Michael	41
Maple Lake	40
Monticello	40

Triples

Loretto	7
Monticello	6

Hits Allowed

Howard Lake	133
Dassel-Cokato	142

Runs Allowed

St. Michael	69
Dassel-Cokato	76

Earned Runs Allowed

St. Michael	54
Dassel-Cokato	58

Strikeouts

Delano	116
St. Michael	108

Walks Allowed

St. Michael	30
Delano	45
Litchfield	45

ERA

St. Michael	3.65
Dassel-Cokato	3.84

Class C regionals look a lot like last year

East divisionals: Villains steal off, Maple Plain soars

For the second year in a row, Albertville made a quick exit from the NSL West divisional playoffs. Ace pitcher Paul Schumacher finally ran out of gas, and the Villains ended their season in crushing fashion. After four innings, Albertville led Loretto 9-0...en route to a 10-9 loss.

The equal and opposite reaction came in Maple Plain, where they not only advanced to regionals but staked the solid #1 seed. Reed Rose pitched a two-hitter in the final as Maple Plain topped Monticello 4-2.

West divisionals: Order reversed, same effect

Kingston made things interesting again, but Litchfield and Howard Lake are heading to regions.

Though the gap between the top and bottom halves of the division resembled a canyon, Kingston nearly ended Litchfield's season prematurely. The Kings led 2-1 after four innings last Friday. Then the rains came, the game resumed on Sunday, and Litchfield pulled away for the 8-2 win.

Howard Lake won a pair of 4-3 games over Litch, both on the last at-bat.

...around the horn

Ice cold bee-ah hee-ah!

Friday the 13th has nothing on Howard Lake.

The Orphans—or, more accurately, their fans—took in one of the most enjoyable nights in recent NSL history on Friday, July 13. For starters, the West division pennant was on the line. A win over Mound, and they'd have their first title since 1997.

That was nailed down in short order. Howard Lake exploded for 13 runs in the first, tacked on another three in the second, and cruised to a 16-4 rout.

The evening was punctuated by a visit from leather-lunged celebrity Wally the Bearman, the veritable virtuoso of vending. Attendance on the night? Over 500—making the whole night pretty outstanding for town-team baseball.

Fool me once...

Avid followers of St. Michael's website (there are thousands, we're told) may have noticed an eye-opening score posted recently. It listed the score of its June 23 game against defending state champ Cold Spring as Springers 42, St. Michael 0.

Huh? We know there's an outside chance someone hangs an L on the Saints every now and then, but this...couldn't be.

And apparently, it wasn't. Days later, the score changed to the more-realistic tally of 10-3. Still a loss, but a reasonable one. Perhaps former St. Michael player and webmaster Ross Weber will be relinquishing the title of Saint....

It's in the numbers

They say there are lies, damn lies, and statistics...but sometimes statistics don't lie.

For example, Litchfield didn't win the West for the first time this season. The Blues have always been a powerful squad at the plate. This year, they hit all of 9 home runs, good for dead last in the league and almost 20 off the league-leading pace.

And Delano gets the Pele award on defense. Out of the 127 runs the A's pitching gave up, 46—a full one-third—were unearned.

Boxscore Line of the Week

Loretto didn't have too many highlights to speak of this season, but one thing emerged: they seem to have found a new ace pitcher. That question was cemented on July 13, when Joe Hitchings turned in a marvelous performance against divisional rival Maple Plain. Hitchings' numbers: 9 IP, 5 hits, 0 runs, 7 Ks, 4 BB.