

The North Star League Spectator

2003 Season Preview Issue

53rd Year

There's a **new...**

- team in Rockford
- optimism in Monticello
- nickname in Maple Plain
- manager in Delano
- and not much going on west of Darwin.

Ready for a **new** season?

Anatomy of a breakup

North Star League, Litchfield go separate ways

If you like mustard with your baseball, you may go a little hungry this summer. That's because everyone's favorite hot dogs, the Litchfield Blues, are no longer members of North Star League. The Blues and the league parted ways during the September season-end league meeting.

Ever since Litchfield joined the NSL in 1997, league members sensed a noticeable "Litchfield way" of doing things that rankled the league brass. Something always seemed to be coming up, be it rule-skirting or behavior that ranged from truculent to bullying to childish.

The league is pretty serious about maintaining the spirit of town-team ball, and that importance had become a minor source of derision in Litchfield. Over the past five years, the Blues' participation had become something of an open sore, an annoyance that the league had to either put up with or remove altogether.

The last straw came in August. After word got out that (unbeknownst to the league) first-year Blues star Bill Bragg lived

in the Twin Cities, NSL leadership decided they'd had enough.

Minutes before the September league meeting, NSL president Dick Traen and secretary Brian Larson approached Blues manager Rube Nathe and Litchfield Baseball Association (LBA) president Greg Johnson informing them of an upcoming vote to remove the Blues from the league. The vote ended 11-0 in favor of removing Litchfield. However, two managers abstained—thus shooting down the resolution, since expelling a league member requires a unanimous vote. But Nathe and Johnson, citing a lack of support, chose to leave anyway.

Blues management claimed the NSL voted them out because of their success; they'd gone to state ever since joining the league. However, their claim rings hollow in the face of the evidence. Consider:

- In 1998, the Blues bullied their way out of a playoff forfeit to Kingston, then skirted the rules on when to reschedule.
- Two years ago, University of Arkansas catcher Brady Toops, a New London

resident, played with the Blues until concerns about his eligibility surfaced. The league ruled that Toops had not sufficiently established residency within Litchfield's 15-mile radius but opted not to penalize Litchfield the handful of games Toops had played in a Blues uniform.

- During these proceedings, LBA member Tom Smith, a diplomatic genius if ever there were one, came to a league meeting and loudly berated the NSL leadership and managers. This little episode planted the seeds of the breakup.
- Then, last season, Toops joined on by establishing residency (though not actually relocating). The Blues touched off a cute little brouhaha at Monticello. And Bragg's residence issues showed the Blues hadn't learned from their past transgressions.

After failing to secure a spot in three other leagues, Litchfield finally surfaced as a Class B team in the Central Valley League. We wish the Central Valley all the best with their new dance partners.

After decades, Maple Plain picks a name

It's the Diamond Devils!

"Saps" was one thing. So was "Pinecones." (Pinecones!?) But when people started calling the Maple Plain town team the "Muffins," well...a man can only put up with so much.

That's why, after 30 years without a nickname, the Maple Plain town team decided to find a new name.

A contest followed, and the locals contributed 180 suggestions (though, as manager John Timpe said, "Rippburger and I probably put in half of 'em"). The list was cut in half, and then cut in half again. When all the dust had settled, "Dust Devils" was the champion—and the contributor won a \$30 gift certificate. But the process wasn't quite over. The team figured "Diamond Devils" sounded like more of a baseball name, so Diamond Devils it was.

The biggest surprise of all? "Only two of the suggestions were obscene," said Timpe.

2003 Previews: East, West balance out, Central still loaded

North Star West

For the **Buffalo Bulldogs** and **Kings-ton Kings**, this year's anthem is, "I can see clearly now, the reign is gone." Those two teams have spent what feels like ages staring up the standings at Litchfield—the entire 6-year life of the Kings team and going back to Buffalo's former life as the Merchants. Monticello came in last year and snared 12 wins of their own.

2002 Standings	
Litchfield	13 4
Monticello	12 5
Howard Lake	12 5
Buffalo	5 12
Kingston	3 14

All of a sudden, the clouds have cleared. Monticello heads East, Kingston and Litchfield brings its act west to the Central Valley League. Taking their place is the **Rockford River Bandits**. Their's big shoes to fill for an expansion club!

The **Howard Lake Orphans** currently sit atop this division, and it's difficult to imagine anyone knocking them off. The Orphans have been a contender for the past three seasons, though their failure to reach state gives them a little more incentive. (In fact, no current NSL team made the Class C state tournament last year.) Howard Lake boasts Shane Heber and Jake Streich, the town-team version of Johnson and Schilling, and fills out a fine rotation with Adam Koch, Ben Borrell, and Andy Gagnon. They'll have to carry the Orphans again; their lineup struggled to produce runs, and veterans Tom Herda and Derek Fogarty are gone.

Buffalo's first season back was a promising one. Though the **Dogs** finished 5-13, their outfield of Ryan Olson, Matt Olson, and Ben Geelan was solid and gets better with Brad Weber coming from New Ulm. The key to challenging Howard Lake is rotation consistency from Ian Keen, Shane Trigg, and Aaron Desmarais.

Speaking of consistency, that's Kingston's greatest struggle. The Kings will add 8 or 9 young players, but 5 others (including Justin McKinley and Ryan Lun-deen) have moved on. If they can show more plate discipline, the Kings should improve on last year.

North Star Central

It says something about your program when a 9-8 season feels like a disaster, but

that's exactly how the **St. Michael Saints** view their 2002 campaign. The Saints battled injuries, the loss of several key veterans, and an improved division en route to finishing (*gasp!*) a game over .500.

The Saints will be good this year, but we can't ascribe greatness to them just yet. They lose veteran Scott Lekatz and perhaps Dave Ditty. Derek Brant may leave to play in a wood-bat league in California. And stars Grant Ketel and Kyle Krzmarzick hope to bounce back from injuries. Paul Schumm, Aaron Cook, and Kevin Kottke pace the rotation, but if Ketel can't revert to form, they'll need to call on Eric Kolles.

On the other end of the Sainly spectrum, the **Dassel-Cokato Saints** are looking to build on a solid 2002. The return of Brent Pokornowski will bring a measurable improvement to their lineup. However, D-C's hallmark—its rotation—is showing some cracks. Kevin Nelson and Dan Birkholz are gone, and Andrew Carlson is battling arm troubles.

The **Hutchinson Huskies** enjoyed a solid season last year, finally getting over the hump and advancing to state. They may lose outfielders Justin Martin & Ryan Kaping, but the veterans are just too good to let the Huskies slip.

2002 Standings	
Dassel-Cokato	12 5
Maple Lake	11 6
Hutchinson	10 7
St. Michael	9 8
Delano	6 11

The **Maple Lake Lakers** always seem to have the horses, but they can't quite survive the playoffs. They lose a few players (Craig Fobbe, Aaron Demarais, Dan Zezza, Eric Raisanen), but this is still a scary team if they can keep it together. Steve Eilen is the new skipper for the **Delano Athletics**. Some welcome, too—Kevin Jaunich (ACL) and Brent Muckenhirn (shoulder) are both out. However, Derek Falde is back from a three-year hiatus. The Athletics still need one or two pitchers to emerge before they contend in the Central, but it should be a fun year.

North Star East

For the past several seasons, the East and West divisions have rotated a couple teams, since only three Class C teams could truly be considered "West." 2002's NSL West race had all the grue-some inevitability of a Bud Selig conflict of interest. You knew what was going to happen, you couldn't do anything about it, but damn if you couldn't look away.

The **Monticello Polecats'** number came up in 2002. Despite being tucked in the far northeast corner of the league, the Polecats took their turn heading West. Bummer was, everything was supposed to come together for Monti in 2002. But they were sharing a top-heavy division with Litchfield and Howard Lake, and the mighty Polecats didn't even make regions.

This season, there's a renewed sense of optimism in Monticello. On paper, there's no reason the Polecats shouldn't take the East. This is a division that's had trouble getting above .500, and Monticello comes back emboldened and maybe a little bitter from its trip out West.

2002 Standings	
Maple Plain	8 8
Loretto	7 9
Albertville	6 10
Mound	3 13

However, the rest of the Eastern teams didn't lose much over the winter, and the Polecats might get skunked if they look past their competition. The **Albertville Villains** are as speedy as they get. What's more, they're actually starting to establish something resembling a rotation. For years, Paul Schumacher had been the lone horse, but Rob Wilkens, Jesse Scherber, and Jim Litzau carry the Villains' fortunes.

Young teams **Loretto Larks** and **Maple Plain Diamond Devils** didn't lose much talent over the winter, other than Maple Plain pitcher Josh Jacobson, who headed over to Mound. The last-place **Mound Mallards** bring back several players (Joe Anderson, Darc Trnka, Josh Johnson) who'd taken seasons off. These gains, plus a longer-than-expected playoff run, give the Mallards reason for hope after a dismal 2002.