

The North Star League

Spectator

2002 Season Preview Issue

52nd Year

Merchants no more**Buffalo's back in the league**

When the Buffalo Merchants closed up shop in 1999, their roster had dwindled to barely a full lineup of nine. So upon re-joining the league, the new management wanted to prove itself solidly viable.

Introducing the **Buffalo Bulldogs**, 36 players strong.

"A town like Buffalo should have a baseball team," said manager Jason Opsal. "It's a prime spot, and I wanted to play ball with the guys I grew up with."

Opsal, a junior at Gustavus, has spent the past couple summers playing with the Albertville Villains. He indicated that it's "a great group of guys over there," but that he was particularly drawn to re-establishing a squad in Buffalo—enough that he has no plans to play this year.

"There are just so many conflicts of interest when you play and manage at the same time," he indicated, adding, "looking at this list of players, there's no guarantee I'd crack the lineup anyway!"

From the looks of it, the Bulldogs are off to a healthy start. They opted for a catchier, more marketable name and re-established a connection with the local high school. Opsal noted, "We want to attract the high school's top talent every year, and there's been a tremendous response from the whole community." He contacted some people he knew who played baseball, put an ad in the paper, and all of a sudden, his list of players grew from nine to 36 in the course of a week. That's a success rate that would make most NSL teams salivate.

This development is encouraging for the league in general. Buffalo is the largest town in the area—and, thanks to the bulldog determination of Opsal, it should offer more great baseball, too.

Wood bats get the nod**North Star teams applaud as state board scraps aluminum**

A familiar sound will return to ballparks around the state this summer. The harsh, futuristic *ting* of the metal bat has given way to the welcome *crack* of ash or pine, pleasing pitchers and baseball Luddites alike.

The Minnesota Baseball Association moved to outlaw aluminum bats for the 2002 season. This change stems from a two-year study in Class A (teams within I-494/694 loop), and it has received a very favorable response.

What's behind the change? Well, it has nothing to do with the retro craze. Much as the state board loves to be fashionable, it boiled down to three reasons:

Wood bats are safer. Aluminum bats generate greater bathead speed, often shooting the ball toward the pitcher at well over 100 mph. For guys who have day jobs and pay to play, there's no reason to expose them to such risk. Wood is by no means sponge, but it does take some edge off a screaming liner.

Games played with wood bats were 25% shorter. Fewer eight-run innings mean fewer three-hour games. Any complaints?

The change will emphasize fundamentals. The state board's press release put it well: "[Town team] baseball has started to resemble slow-pitch softball." You'll see greater reliance on fielding, throwing, and running, and less on three-run homers—in essence, a more entertaining game.

The change has created some positive buzz around the league. Some players are excited for the new experience of swinging the hickory. Others, such as Monticello's Rick Habeck, have come back from retirement *because* of the change. Veteran pitchers around the league are thinking this move just may have added two or three years to their careers.

And the traditionalists? Well, they're just ready to hear that familiar *crack* from something other than Twins broadcasts.

2002 Preview: Thirsty for action?

Ready to drink in some quality baseball this year? Here are a few things to look for in 2002:

Making lemonade—How will league power St. Michael respond after a near-perfect season but going two-and-out at state?

Popping the cork—Can Howard Lake capitalize on its breakthrough season, winning the West and earning top regional seed in '01?

Happy hour—The North Star League brings back its league All-Star Game on July 5.

Whine & cheese—Due to age-old differences, Hamel is off the schedule of the NSL's Class B teams and has been relegated to 6th seed for the section playoffs.

Spiked punch—The NSL West is home to last year's top three Class C teams. This gives intense weight to the divisional playoffs, since just two teams advance to regions.

7-Up—On the flip side, no NSL East team

won more than seven games last year, meaning the division is completely up for grabs in '02.

Milking it—Can Delano seize on its improbable run to state, building inspiration... and a few more wins?

Drinking the Kool-aid—Monticello, ready to go deeper into the playoffs, has hired Tom Holthaus as its new bench manager. The Polecats will have to buy into Holthaus' strategy just to make it out of the West.

Powerade—Litchfield is coming off a season in which its HR production dropped off by 20 from the previous year. Will the Blues get reacquainted with the longball, or will they put less focus on mashing it and accept a new small-ball strategy?

Magic potion—Will numbers-challenged Kingston and Mound put together a formula for more than a couple wins?

Loretto Larks

Pitching	★
Hitting (Avg.)	★ ★ ★
Power	★ ★
Speed	★ ★ ★ ★
Fielding	★ ★
Experience	★ ★

Outlook: This is Year 3 of the Larks' rebuilding process, and the efforts are beginning to show. Manager Herb Koch has set a realistic goal of a winning record. If some leadership can surface among the new guard, it's a very attainable goal—especially in the NSL East.

This team will put up some runs, no doubt. All-league outfielders **Brandon Scanlon** (.522, 35 hits) and **Eric Schutte** (.456, 17 runs) ignite the offense. Pitching remains the X factor. Youngsters **Joe Hitching** and **Nick Koch** showed potential in '01. They'll be called on to carry the load for the Larks.

Mound Mallards

Pitching	★
Hitting (Avg.)	★ ★
Power	★ ★
Speed	★ ★ ★
Fielding	★ ★
Experience	★

Outlook: Considering it was a fresh start last year for Mound, the new-car smell wore off awfully fast. The team joined the NSL with hopes of matching up better with its competition. Unfortunately, the Mallards were placed in the inhospitable West. Moving to the East should be an encouraging change of scenery this year for **Andy Snyder's** team.

Mound loses its workhorse pitcher, Ben Hogg, but welcomes 10 new players as well as a new ballpark. This team will need to walk before it runs, however, as 8 players are either 18 or 19 years old. If some leadership surfaces (to say nothing of better pitching), .500 is realistic.

Maple Plain Town Team

Pitching	★ ★
Hitting (Avg.)	★ ★ ★
Power	★ ★ ★
Speed	★ ★ ★
Fielding	★ ★ ★
Experience	★ ★ ★ ★

Outlook: Manager John Timpe has reason for optimism as he enters his 30th year of coaching. His team has a rather enviable mix of veterans (**Andy Timpe, Brandon & Troy Schliinz, Matt Dunewald**) to provide leadership and younger guys who've been around the block (**Brad Mazer, Joe Wood, Pat McPherson**) to provide the spark. If they can stay focused—and healthy—you're looking at the division favorites.

Mazer's return from his wood-bat league is a major shot in the arm, especially as Maple Plain tries to replace CF Neil Johnson at leadoff. Pitchers need to improve on team ERA of 7.74.

Albertville Villains

Pitching	★ ★
Hitting (Avg.)	★ ★
Power	★ ★
Speed	★ ★ ★ ★
Fielding	★ ★ ★
Experience	★

Outlook: If any team got buffaloed over the offseason, it was Albertville. The return of Buffalo to the NSL decimated the Villains' lineup, taking Ramon Vega, Keith Nygaard, Ed Shult, Aric Bethke, and Jason Opsal. Fortunately the Villains are reloading with nine talented rookies.

Two stars under pitching is misleading. RHP **Paul Schumacher** (7-2, 3.99) earns at least four stars on his own, but the lack of a reliable second hurler brings the score down—and spells doom in the playoffs. SS **Shane McLaughlin** and 1B **Todd Klaers** solidify the infield. For a rebuilding year, '02 shouldn't be awful...but make no mistake, this is a rebuilding year.

2001 Standings		
Monticello	10	5
Albertville	7	8
Maple Plain	5	10
Loretto	4	11

North Star East Class C

Why the divisional disparity?

Basically, you can point to the Buffalo Merchants. When they folded in '99, they left the NSL West at 3 teams—a divisional no-no, according to the state board. The NSL received a temporary injunction but needed to find a fourth team to complete the West. Otherwise, back to two divisions.

That paved the way for Mound to join the league last season. The Mallards, originally a Class B team, dropped down to C and played in the West. But because they were technically one of the easternmost teams in the league, it was determined that one East team should play in the West every year on a revolving basis. This year, Monticello's number came up.

When the Buffalo Bulldogs were accepted into the league, they were placed in the West as insurance—if they happen to fold, four teams are still around to maintain the minimum membership. But if they have staying power, that assignment could be permanent. We'll take it one year at a time!

Kingston Kings

Pitching	★
Hitting (Avg.)	★ ★
Power	★ ★
Speed	★ ★
Fielding	★ ★
Experience	★

Outlook: The breakout year is always right around the corner in Kingston. Just when you think they're about to establish a presence in the league, someone switches teams or the division bulks up.

This year, it's mostly the latter. Role player Tom Borrell moved back with his ilk in Howard Lake, but most of the Kings return for another year. However, the divisional switcheroo is a real pain for Kingston; Mound was their one win.

The offense will be fine—all their top run-producers are back. It's the run-givers-up they need to worry about. The Kings committed regicide with a team ERA of 11.23, but a healthy **Brian Peterson** will make a big difference.

Howard Lake Orphans

Pitching	★ ★ ★ ★
Hitting (Avg.)	★ ★
Power	★ ★
Speed	★ ★ ★
Fielding	★ ★ ★
Experience	★ ★ ★

Outlook: In a sometimes pitching-poor league, the Orphans are pretty rich. Chad Gagnon retires, but the one-two punch of **Jake Streich** and **Shane Heber** is healthy and ready to carry the Orphans back to state. **Adam Koch**, **Ben Borrell**, and **Andy Gagnon** are formidable arms, too.

That's good, because the Howard Lake offense might need to be carried through a few games. John Stueven, Mark Stueven, and Russ Green have all moved on. Division MVP **Kevin Werner** can play anywhere, and **Mike Gagnon's** ready for another .400 campaign, but this won't be the same deep Orphan lineup that won the West by two games last year.

Litchfield Blues

Pitching	★ ★ ★
Hitting (Avg.)	★ ★ ★
Power	★ ★ ★
Speed	★ ★ ★
Fielding	★ ★ ★
Experience	★ ★ ★ ★

Outlook: In the wild West, the new sheriff in town had always kept order. Except last year, a band of Orphans went crazy and took over—leaving the Litchfield Blues in the unfamiliar position of underdog. How will they respond?

Out of the gates, it's hard to tell. Everyone except Andy Johnson and Nate Turck is back, and OF/P **Bill Bragg**, **C Brady Toops**, and **Tom Rueter** should provide some welcome new blood. **Troy Urdahl** was effective as the second starter behind **Jeff Wollin** last year, too.

Keys for the Blues: **Ed Estrada's** wrist, and the adjustment to wood bats. Those should determine how the West is won.

North Star West Class C

2001 Standings

Howard Lake	9	6
Litchfield	7	8
Mound	3	12
Kingston	1	14

Buffalo Bulldogs

Pitching	Incomplete
Hitting (Avg.)	Incomplete
Power	Incomplete
Speed	Incomplete
Fielding	Incomplete
Experience	Incomplete

Outlook: It wouldn't be fair to grade Buffalo's pitching and hitting if its own manager still isn't sure what to expect, but you can anticipate this much: the Bulldogs won't be your average happy-to-be-here expansion franchise.

Familiar faces include **Ramon Vega**, **Keith Nygaard**, and **Aric Bethke** (Albertville), **Ed Cox** (Hutchinson), and **Russ Green** (Howard Lake), most of whom live in Buffalo and decided to sign up with the hometown team. Also look for offensive spark from **Matt Olson**, **Bobby Dubois**, and **Brandon Dixon**. Pitching is Buffalo's main concern, as Vega is the only experienced hurler.

Monticello Polecats

Pitching	★ ★ ★
Hitting (Avg.)	★ ★ ★ ★
Power	★ ★ ★ ★
Speed	★ ★ ★ ★
Fielding	★ ★ ★
Experience	★ ★ ★

Outlook: Okay, let's get it out in the open: the move to the West was not the best thing that could have happened to Monti. That said, the Polecats hope it ends up as not the best thing that could have happened to Litch or Howard Lake.

One of the big changes for Monticello is at the helm, as Tom Holthaus takes over as bench manager. The Polecats hope his strategic expertise can get them over the hump and back to state.

Monti loses Scott Gibson but returns everyone else, including offensive sparkplugs **Josh Holthaus**, **David Nelson**, and **Joe VanCulin**. If pitching and defense hold up, the Polecats will be the NSL's class of Class C this year.

Delano Athletics

Pitching	☆☆☆☆
Hitting (Avg.)	☆☆☆☆
Power	☆☆
Speed	☆☆☆☆
Fielding	☆☆
Experience	☆☆☆

Outlook: Delano was a true Horatio Alger, rags-to-riches story in '01. Okay, so the A's didn't exactly start out as rags, but anytime a team goes from last place to a berth at state, you take notice.

The big thing Delano carries into this year is a world of confidence. Last year, they lost a handful of veterans and wound up 7-9. This year, just about everyone is back and hungry to build off their improbable, remarkable finish.

Led by **Jeff Janzen** and about 17 **Muckenhirns**, Delano is solid on the hill. If the defense can improve and the offense can generate some power, another trip to state is well within reach.

St. Michael Saints

Pitching	☆☆☆☆☆
Hitting (Avg.)	☆☆☆☆☆
Power	☆☆☆☆☆
Speed	☆☆☆☆☆
Fielding	☆☆☆☆
Experience	☆☆☆☆☆

Outlook: Any writer worth his salt has a hard time giving so many perfect scores. But until St. Michael stops leading the league in just about everything, it's tough not to put up five bombs all over.

The Saints' 2001 season bordered on the ridiculous. 2002 promises much of the same, though **Jeff Jeremiason** is moving out of the area and **Scott Schulte** may take the summer off as well. The house remains full because **Paul Schumm** returns from a year away and some of the younger troops are ready to step up.

Grant Ketel returns to pace the staff, daring anyone to draw a walk, and **Kyle Krzmarzick** tries to grab the triple crown he nearly won in '01.

Dassel-Cokato Saints

Pitching	☆☆☆☆☆
Hitting (Avg.)	☆☆☆☆
Power	☆☆☆
Speed	☆☆☆☆☆
Fielding	☆☆☆☆
Experience	☆☆☆☆

Outlook: If there's an arms race going on in the North Star League, D-C's probably going to win it. The Saints boast remarkable depth on the mound, especially of the southpaw variety. **John Riewer** is the standard bearer for an otherwise youthful corps of **Eric Pokornowski**, **Andrew Carlson**, **Kevin Nelson**, **Chris Strinmoen**, and **Dan Birkholz**. Don't expect D-C to wind up in many 13-12 shootouts.

The Saints lose speedy leftfielder **Brent Pokornowski**, thus dropping one star in power. Otherwise, this is a pretty young team with all kinds of potential. The core of this solid team is still 25 or under.

Maple Lake Lakers

Pitching	☆☆☆
Hitting (Avg.)	☆☆☆☆☆
Power	☆☆☆☆
Speed	☆☆☆
Fielding	☆☆☆☆
Experience	☆☆☆☆

Outlook: If there's one thing you can expect from the Lakers, it's that they will punish the ball. There wasn't a weak spot in their lineup last year. The entire firm of **Goodfellow**, **Johnson**, **Johnson**, **Raiche**, **Jerpseth**, **Vandehey**, **Meuwissen**, and **Wurm** is back in hopes of finally breaking through to the state tournament.

If they're going to do it, their counterparts on the mound will need to pull better than a 6.39 ERA. **Todd DesMarais** (4-0, 3.57 ERA) was reliable all season. If his young supporting cast of **Bob Fobbe**, **Aaron DesMarais**, and **Ryan Klingelhofer** can do the same, the Lakers will contend for the Central crown.

Hutchinson Huskies

Pitching	☆☆
Hitting (Avg.)	☆☆☆☆
Power	☆☆☆
Speed	☆☆
Fielding	☆☆☆☆
Experience	☆☆

Outlook: They lose their ace starter (**Dale Eng**), their best infielder (**Ed Cox**), and their best outfielder (**Dave Schaefer**). The rest of the Central didn't get any weaker over the winter. What, Hutch worry?

At least the Huskies' cupboard isn't completely bare. Veterans OF **Mike Marquardt**, 2B **Tim Johnson**, 1B **Dennis Piechowski**, and 3B **Tim Thode** are as solid a core as any, but Hutch will be pretty young everywhere else.

Eng's departure leaves a bigger hole, however. The Huskies will need a full summer on the mound from **Kyle Messner** and consistency from **Jim Farenbaugh** and **Tony Fischer**.

2001 Standings

St. Michael	15	1
D-C	12	4
Maple Lake	11	5
Hutchinson	9	7
Delano	7	9

North Star Central Class B

A word about the ratings

We here at *Spectator* headquarters want to bury no team before its time. The ratings on these pages are based on past statistics as well as roster knowledge for the year to come. If you think your team didn't rate enough bombs in any category, our experts would be happy to be disproven. Best of luck to all teams in 2002.