

The North Star League

Spectator

Read My Lips: "No New Teams" edition

54th Year

Central: Plenty of buzz for these killer Bs

Dassel-Cokato Saints

2003 Record: 13-4

Newcomers: 1B/OF Jason Ryan, Brice Berggren.

Key players lost: P Andrew Carlson.

This will be a good season if: SS Pete Burkstrand's arm recovers and the Saints repeat just about everything from 2003.

But it will be a disappointment if: Pitching and defense aren't good enough to nail down another division title. Manager Mark Forsman seeks more plate consistency from his team.

The wheels will fall off the wagon if: The newly-bricked grandstand is swallowed up by a sinkhole.

2.13

Saints' team ERA in 2003.

Delano Athletics

2003 Record: 6-11

Newcomers: LHP Frank Wagner, P Aaron Swenson, P Todd Roth.

Key players lost: None.

This will be a good season if: They hit a home run. And get back to .500.

But it will be a disappointment if: the sorely-needed pitching depth doesn't actually materialize and P Jeff Janzen (league-high 77.7 IP last year) wears down.

The wheels will fall off the wagon if: 2003 proves to be more the rule than the exception.

0

Home runs hit by the A's last season.

Hutchinson Huskies

2003 Record: 10-7

Newcomers: Several from HS team.

Key players lost: None.

This will be a good season if: They build on last year's momentum. Manager Lee Kuhl expects big things out of SS Jordan Schwarze, OF Chris Runke, and IF/OF Bobby Nelson.

6

League wins by Kyle Messner last year.

Central, cont. on p. 4

This ain't Comedy Central

Only in the North Star Central is sub-.500 finish considered a novelty. Only in the Central might a 10-win season be seen as a disappointment. In fact, only in the Central is *every single game* pitting any two of these teams a potential headliner. No matter if Hutchinson is playing D-C or Maple Lake squares off against Delano, you'd better stock the concession stand and hold onto your hat.

Last season was another barnburner in the Central. For one, the division had a team with a losing record for the first time in four years. Delano never quite found its groove on offense, which led to a quick dismissal in the opportunistic Central and starved the Athletics' supporters. However, not only is everyone back this year, they also gain former Gopher pitcher (and Brewers minor leaguer) Frank Wagner. Those are good signs for a rebound year in Delano.

On the other hand, the Hutch Huskies were the pleasant surprise of the season. Hutchinson rode the arm of Kyle Messner en route to a 10-win campaign. The Huskies put some serious heat on league champ Dassel-Cokato, and it looks like their core will be back for more of the same in '04.

Not as happy with their 10-win finish was St. Michael...though considering the Saints were trolling around in the basement for a month and a half, they did a pretty good job of salvaging their season. The turnaround was complete by August, when they won the section title and enjoyed an extended state tournament run. Don't expect as much flakiness out of St. Michael in 2004; their roster is more stable this season, and they're ready to prove that last May was a fluke.

D-C and Maple Lake had characteristic seasons, with D-C outracing everyone for the title and Maple Lake losing steam at the end. The Saints return with a near-identical roster, which means they've got pitching and defense out the wazoo. On the other hand, Laker manager Gary Porter hangs up his spikes after 28 years. Joe Hofman takes over as skipper, but it's hard to imagine a better situation for a new young manager to step into. The Lakers are loaded once again, and as long as Hofman can keep the arms fresh until August, Maple Lake will be clawing for a Central pennant.

Not that they won't have some company....

West: Monticello's back for good

Buffalo Bulldogs

2003 Record: 6-10

Newcomers: P Nate Hill, P/IF Randy Bethke, P/IF Eric Krause, OF John Compton.

Key players lost: SS/P Ed Cox, P Aaron DeMarais, CF Ryan Olson.

This will be a good season if: Hill and Krause, both of whom have been clocked in the '80s, more than adequately replace innings-eater DeMarais. OF/P Ramon Vega recaptures the old Ramon. Monti and Howard Lake leave the Western door open.

But it will be a disappointment if: Losing their best hitter and best pitcher are too much to overcome.

The wheels will fall off the wagon if: The team's young core loses focus after a tough May schedule and can't finish strong like 2003.

**.357,
3.57**

Team-best BA and ERA of Ed Cox and Aaron DeMarais, respectively, both departed for 2004.

Injuries, departures flatten West

The year is 2002. East-West Divisional alignment is seriously messed up, touched off by the "Darren Knight Experiment." Dogs frolic with cats, the lion lays down with the lamb, and Eastern Division teams are forced to take weird one-year rotations out West. Monticello's turn came up in 2002, loading that division with the three strongest Class C teams in the North Star. As expected, Monti spends all season locking horns with Howard Lake and Litchfield, eventually becoming odd team out when the other two advance to regions.

Fast-forward to 2004. Monticello's again in the West, but under vastly different circumstances. The Polecats move West because the league bylaws put them there (Monticello is the fourth-westernmost town among NSL Class Cs), and Litchfield is no longer in the league, replaced by a resurrected Buffalo squad. The Polecats remain a league power, but their invincibility has taken a bit of a hit. Josh Holthaus is retiring, taking his triple-crown offense to the local softball league.

Howard Lake remains Monti's divisional foil. Their hope rests on the health of Shane Heber's arm, however. If Heber needs surgery, he'll be out all season, forcing manager Mike Gagnon to be judicious in using their other staff ace, Jake Streich. That's not good news for one of the lighter-hitting units in the league.

Buffalo and Kingston tied for second in the division last season, with Buffalo shocking Howard Lake in the division tournament. Buffalo will count on several pitchers with college experience. If the speedy young Bulldogs gel, they could sneak in and grab the division. And basically all of Kingston's players return this year, giving the Kings hope for an even better 2004. If Howard Lake and Monticello prove vulnerable, it's a very realistic goal.

Howard Lake Orphans

2003 Record: 13-3

Newcomers: IF Josiah Hagemann, OF Tom Bobrowski, P Steve Miller, IF Luke Gagnon, OF Matt Streich, OF/C Matt Donovan.

Key players lost: OF Dean Gagnon, OF Brad Wynnemer, OF Tom Borrell, DH Mike Gagnon.

This will be a good season if: Heber's healthy enough to pitch. Doubtful....

But it will be a disappointment if: Five rookies from 2003 state HS champs can't spark the offense.

The wheels will fall off the wagon if: In making up for Heber's absence, Streich gets overpitched.

2.11

Combined ERA of Heber and Streich in 2003.

Kingston Kings

2003 Record: 6-10

Newcomers: Justin Triplett, Derek Isaacson.

Key players lost: Larry Niemela, Nick Woetzel, Ryan Picken.

This will be a good season if: Pitching depth emerges behind staff ace Brad Paulson. Entire 2003 core returns to build on last season's six wins.

But it will be a disappointment if: The hitters can't improve on last year's .256 mark. If no reliable second starter develops, last season's six wins might represent a Kingly ceiling.

The wheels will fall off the wagon if: They lose key players to injury down the stretch like Trent Morgan in '03.

6.77

Kings' league-worst ERA in 2003.

Monticello Polecats

2003 Record: 13-4 (NSL East)

Newcomers: None.

Key players lost: UTIL Josh Holthaus, IF/P Arin VanCulin, IF/P Tony Hoaglund.

This will be a good season if: The remaining lineup can compensate for all that lost offense.

But it will be a disappointment if: They don't win the West. Polecats' laughing-stock days are ancient history, and anything less than a division title is a disappointment for this crew.

The wheels will fall off the wagon if: They finish third or fourth. How will the Polecats respond if the losses pile up? This team doesn't know losing...yet.

31

League-high hits in 2003 for Joe VanCulin.

East: Maple Plain wears the bullseye

Other four teams take aim

Last season, in a division that was Monticello's for the taking, the Maple Plain Diamond Devils nearly pitchforked the favorites. Maple Plain was just a game out of first place with one game to go on July 13 when the two squads met for one last *tete-a-tete*. The Devils lost 5-4 in 11 agonizing innings. Monti salvaged its divisional pride, but Maple Plain had succeeded in scaring the stink out of the Polecats.

This season, the path looks somewhat clearer for Maple Plain. Not only did the division send Monticello to the West for Rockford and a fungo bat to be named later, the Diamond Devils did a great job of tending their own shop. John Timpe's squad has a stocked lineup once again, and they picked up former New Germany pitcher and Crow River League MVP Adam Gregg. The Devils would have been East favorites anyway, but that move more or less mixed the cement.

The rest of the division is sort of bunched up, though Loretto is the likeliest candidate to create some separation. Their core has been mostly intact for the past few years, and they've climbed back into respectability. They could still use more pitching, but the offensive firm of Schutte, Scanlon, and Koch will keep the basepaths plenty warm.

revelation in 2003.

But it will be a disappointment if: They don't win the division.

The wheels will fall off the wagon if: The offense can't support the pitching. These guys played some serious small-ball last year with just 1 triple and 1 HR among them.

1.15

League-best 2003 ERA for Brandon Schliinz.

Mound Mallards

2003 Record: 5-12

Newcomers: OF Dean Elebrecht, P/OF Ryan Kirtz, P/SS Mike Mitchell, C/IF Terry Noor.

Key players lost: P Josh Jacobson.

This will be a good season if: They can find a new staff ace after Jacobson moved to Idaho.

But it will be a disappointment if: They can't improve on last year's record in a weakened division.

The wheels will fall off the wagon if: They can't shake last year's habit of nerve-wracking one-run losses.

99

Walks given up by Mound pitchers in '03, most in the league.

Albertville Villains

2003 Record: 5-12

Newcomers: C Kyle Rogers, CF Mike Schultz.

Key players lost: CF Jesse Hackenmueller, Dan Brant (60-day DL—dislocated shoulder).

This will be a good season if: Troy Klaers, Jesse Scherber, Brandon Valerius, and Rob Wilkens get some help at the plate.

But it will be a disappointment if: The offense can't improve on last year's .238 team BA and take advantage of a weakened division.

The wheels will fall off the wagon if: Starting pitchers Paul Schumacher and Jesse Scherber wear out by July.

2

HRs for Troy Klaers, the only fence-clearer on the team.

Loretto Larks

2003 Record: 6-11

Newcomers: P Mark Rick

Key players lost: None.

This will be a good season if: The Larks assume Monti's vacant spot in the division hierarchy. This is an experienced team.

But it will be a disappointment if: Young staff ace Nick Koch can't build on a solid (4-4, 3.09) 2003.

The wheels will fall off the wagon if: The league imposes a no-relatives-on-the-same-team rule.

75

Innings pitched by Nick Koch, second-most in the NSL.

Maple Plain Diamond Devils

2003 Record: 11-6

Newcomers: P Adam Gregg

Key players lost: None.

This will be a good season if: Last year's momentum carries over, ending the East pennant race by mid-June. P Brandon Schliinz (5-0) was nothing less than a

Rockford River Bandits

2003 Record: 2-14 (NSL West)

Newcomers: Brent Loyne, P Ian Keen.

Key players lost: OF Niles Lewin.

This will be a good season if: The River Bandits take advantage of their new field and find their stride. A .500 season would be a big success.

But it will be a disappointment if: Two words: sophomore slump.

The wheels will fall off the wagon if: The second-year chemistry goes sour—unlikely, but new teams are a fragile lot.

.214

Bandits' team BA in 2003.

Central, cont. from p. 1

But it will be a disappointment if: The Huskies can't improve on their subpar .257 team batting average.

The wheels will fall off the wagon if: Messner and P Jim Farenbaugh can't stay healthy.

Maple Lake Lakers

2003 Record: 10-7

Newcomers: Mgr. Joe Hofman, OF Darrin Decker, IF/P Marcus Zahn.

Key players lost: Mgr. Gary Porter

This will be a good season if: The Lakers exorcise past ghosts and win critical games in July and August. And if big bats like Keith Jerpseth (.403), Dan VanDehey (.405), and Pete Goodfellow (.395) can pick up on last year's torrid numbers.

But it will be a disappointment if: Those ghosts come back,

1

Mustache shaved by P Todd DeMarais to start the season.

because this team has strong pennant potential.

The wheels will fall off the wagon if: New manager Joe Hofman can't spark renewed enthusiasm on this veteran squad.

St. Michael Saints

2003 Record: 10-7

Newcomers: Scott Lekatz returns after 2-year absence.

Key players lost: None.

This will be a good season if: P Grant Ketel, MI Kyle Krzmarzick, and P/OF Eric Kolles all return successfully from injury.

But it will be a disappointment if: Their state momentum doesn't carry over to this season.

The wheels will fall off the wagon if:

They finish below .500. This team is good at a lot of things, but losing is not one of them.

7

Different Saints pitchers who recorded a win in 2003.

Harby Dicks predicts...the 2004 season

Harby Dicks is the longtime "soothsayer" of the *Northwest Umpire Review*, forerunner to the *NSL Spectator*. Mr. Dicks's snarky weekly predictions tweaked many a central Minnesota town team in the 1950s and 1960s.

Although Mr. Dicks now lives in Sun City, Arizona, he has continued to follow our local ballclubs. He hasn't written a column since 1973 (*i.e.*, before the current *Spectator* staff was born), but much like Sid Hartman, his icon status somehow carries on. Let's see how the ancient one handicaps the 2004 North Star League season....

North Star West

Howard Lake still has the best pitching of all the Class C teams in the league and maybe in all the league period. If they can find some hitting, watch out!! First place for sure.

Monticello's the best hitting team in the league, but no pitching means they will have to settle for second best in the West. If they can find some pitching, this could make a tight race in the West.

Buffalo got off to a slow start in 2003, but was an unstoppable freight train coming down the tracks at playoff time. Light on pitching and hitting, the Bulldogs will be a spoiler with a third place finish.

Kingston had its best year in 2003 and won't have to be in a rebuilding mode as the core players are there. Pitching is the name of the game and Kingston needs more names.

North Star East

Maple Plain's pitching and timely hitting was a steady diet for the Diamond Devils in 2003 and providing they don't go on a low-carb diet the East should be theirs for the taking.

Loretto has a nice mix of veteran and young players and if the

pitching and hitting can show up at the same time they could push the Diamond Devils for first. Otherwise, second place is theirs.

Mound moved out of the cellar last year but ran out of players and gas at playoff time. The ability is there if they can find a way to play a whole season. Third place sounds good for them.

Rockford played very well for an expansion team all year, playing in many close games. Unable to score runs was their downfall, and pitching will have to carry them again.

Albertville is a team with a lot of question marks. A lot of player turnover makes for a last place finish. Pitching will keep them in their games but fielding and hitting will not.

North Star Central

Dassel-Cokato has a steady diet of pitching, and good defense will keep them on top. If some hitting appears, they could put some large space between them and the rest.

Hutchinson has maybe the most balanced team in the Central, with a nice mix of pitching and hitting along with veterans and young players. If they can get hot like the playoffs of 2002, they could put the heat on D-C.

St. Michael is a veteran team you never can count out. At mid-season last year, they were in last place. During Section 8 playoffs, no one was hotter than the Saints, so this makes them the hardest team to predict. We don't know what team will show up.

Maple Lake is the team that always has great hitting but is thin on pitching. If pitching does show up, the Lakers could go from fourth to first. Offseason change of managers has not been a negative.

Delano is a young and up and coming team led by the capable Steve Eilen. The A's continue to add players to the team to fill holes. Their day will come, but not in 2004.