

The North Star League

Spectator

Rain Delay edition

No retractable roofs**Ballpark Fever hits four NSL towns**

First the Twins, then the Saints: both looking for stadium upgrades. Perhaps they could take notes from a few of our teams, because four towns are enjoying significant upgrades down at the park.

Most significantly, **Albertville** has begun construction on its own ballpark. Since the Villains' inception four years ago, they've split time with the Saints over at St. Michael. However, last year the Albertville City Council approved the project, and grading began this spring. "I don't anticipate the fences and all should take too long," said Villains manager Paul Schumacher, "but it'll be good to get the field done before winter."

In the interim, the Villains have adopted Buffalo as their temporary home.

Down the road, **St. Michael** is celebrating the construction of lights and an electronic scoreboard. The Saints have long been a traveling teamon weeknights because their park couldn't handle nightfall. "I've been managing here for 30 years," laughed Saints skipper Roger Ketel. "This is like a dream come true."

On the western end of the league, the other Saints feel just as good about their ballpark project. Capping off a series of improvements at the Dassel Ball Park, the **D-C Saints** is building a brand-new covered grandstand. This replaces a couple of open-top aluminumbleacher sections. Not only will this enhance the ballpark, it also helped land Dassel the 2005 state tournament with Hutchinson.

And they'll be lapping up southern comfort in **Litchfield**, because the Blues just purchased a section of stands from Atlanta's old Fulton County Stadium. No word on how many of the seats absorbed home runs off the bat of Hank Aaron.

Losing the arms race**Pitching in short supply so far***New bats making no difference, North Star teams battle high ERAs*

During the first month of every season, it has become fashionable to joke that many scores look like football result. Ha ha!

Well, the joke has grown old. Partly because a few pitchers around here have, too.

Scores are up yet again in the North Star League. Although several games have ended in respectable 8-7 tallies, teams have scored in double figures 13 times already this season—three times in the 20s. Monticello's 24-14 victory over Loretto on May 20 certainly must rank among the highest combined scores in North Star history.

On the one hand, it's easy to give the offenses a pat on the bat, since eight of the 13 teams are batting over .300.

But most baseball fans would sooner see a bona fide pitchers' duel than have a demolition derby, and those have been sorely missing.

This comes as a bit of a surprise, considering the new bat standards enacted by the Minnesota Baseball Association. Responding to the increased potency of aluminum bats and the danger they pose to pitchers, the state board passed the "-3 rule." This means that no bat's weight can be less than three ounces below its length, in inches. For example, a 34-inch bat must weigh 31 ounces or more. The rule was established to decrease bathead speed. And what a lot of good it's done.

More significantly, the pitching staffs around the North Star League just ain't what they used to be. Most teams are dealing with shorter staffs than they're used to, and some towns might even find you a nice job if you can step in as a number-two starter.

One visible example is **St. Michael**, where a solid three-man rotation appears to have dwindled to one. Starter Mike Barthel retired, and Paul Schumm very well may do the same. That leaves Grant Ketel—which means the cupboard is hardly bare, since Ketel is

probably the league's most dominant pitcher of the past decade. The Saints will have to rely on younger arms like Aaron Cook, Eric Kolles, and Rob Wilkens (a recent arrival from Albertville) to maintain their winning ways.

Hutchinson has a major hole to fill, but it took nobody by surprise. Recently named Pitcher of the Year at Minnesota, Mike Kobow appears to have finally moved up into the wood-bat ranks. The remaining committee has filled in well so far, if a bit inconsistently.

Litchfield's Rod Schroeder had toyed with the idea of retirement once or twice before, but this year it seems to have stuck. Throw in the departure of Greg Nathe, and veteran Jeff Wollin looks pretty lonely. Troy Urdahl and Travis Johnson seem to be picking up Schroeder's share of innings, though the Blues haven't exactly blasted out of the gate so far.

Speaking of innings, **Albertville's** Paul Schumacher is perfect so far. He has pitched every single inning the Villains have played in the NSL. Schumacher has generally been seen as a workhorse, but this is ridiculous. Hey, the good part is that he's already over halfway to his strikeout total of last year!

Elsewhere, **Kingston, Loretto, and Mound** all boast team ERAs over 10. **Maple Plain** runs hot and cold but has seen some good innings out of Pat McPherson and Jason Stephenhagen. **Delano** continues to be the Jeff Janzen show, where the ace of the A's has appeared in all four games so far (but is tagged with an uncharacteristic 1-3 record for his efforts). The committee at **Maple Lake** has been effective thus far.

On the flip side, **D-C** boasts a 1.80 ERA and may have found yet another young dart-thrower in Eric Pokornowski. The tandem of Rick Habeck and Dusty Decker has given **Monticello** a solid start, while **Howard Lake** is paced yet again by the reliable Shane Heber.

What a drip

Forget the jokes about April showers and May flowers. We're now learning what May showers bring: a messed-up schedule in the North Star League.

By Memorial Day weekend, the NSL had already seen nine games postponed due to rain. These rainouts just might prove chaotic later this season as the teams schedule makeup dates. We already saw it last weekend, when Litchfield hosted both Loretto and D-C on Sunday. They nipped the Larks 8-7 but came up flat against the Saints, falling 5-2. Not exactly how anyone wanted it, but at this point they'll take any day the skies don't open up.

NSL on the WWW

Now that the D-C Saints have created a team website, we thought it worthwhile to list all the NSL-related websites built so far:

Dassel-Cokato Saints

www.dcsaints.com

Delano Athletics

www.delanoathletics.com

Hutchinson Huskies

www.hutchhuskies.homestead.com

Monticello Polecats

www.montipolecats.com

St. Michael Saints

www.stmichaelsaints.com

North Star League

www.northstarleague.org

Talk about relief

Hutchinson's Dale Eng pitched 7.1 innings in the Huskies' 7-6 win over Monticello. In the effort, he gave up just three earned runs and struck out five to get the win.

What's so great about that? Eng came on in relief in the bottom of the sixth, and the game went 13 innings! In this case, the reliever pitched almost four times as long as the Huskies starter.

The North Star League Spectator and Spectator Online are provided free of charge to fans of North Star League baseball. Please contact Erik Lien at eclien@mninter.net if you have any questions or suggestions.

...around the horn

Welcome to the club!

The Mallards must be the Charles Barkley team of the NSL, because 'round Mound, they're hoping to rebound.

Mound, which came over from the Eastern Minny League looking for shorter commutes and a little more luck, is batting one for two on that front. The Mallards (then the Mudcats) won five games a year ago but is thus far 0-4 in the North Star.

Mound did lose three good hitters from last year's squad, but manager Andy Snyder didn't expect it to affect them quite this much. The Mallards, tied with Kingston in the NSL West, are hitting just .184 as a team. You get the feeling that their elevator can only go up....

That clank you just heard...

Only in the North Star League do you get math like this. On May 16, Litchfield squared off against Delano. The Blues won, 23-8, but that wasn't the worst of it.

Of Litchfield's 23 runs, only 11—fewer than half—were earned. Litchfield needed just 16 hits to do it, thanks in large part to the Athletics' 7 errors and 12 passed balls!

Not in our league

Maple Plain's Brad Mazer has led his team for a couple years now, but the All-MIAC player at Gustavus has moved on to the wood-bat ranks. Perhaps he was just bored. In three NSL games this year, Mazer batted 8-for-9 with a double, 2 homers, 6 runs, and 5 RBIs.

Nine up, nine in

Straight out of the You Don't See That Every Day Dept.: in St. Michael's June 3 win over Kingston, the host Saints konged the Kings at the outset. The first nine St. Michael batters—the entire lineup—not only got on base but *scored* in a nine-run first inning.

Teaches Kingston for scoring three in the top of the first....

Winning ways out East

After a real clunker of a 2000 season, teams in the NSL East was looking to pick up a few more wins outside the division.

Let's see...Albertville tipped Delano and 10-run Mound. Loretto nearly knocked off Litchfield. Maple Plain has looked promising. But the class of the division so far is Monticello, which zapped Howard Lake and nearly beat Hutch en route to a 5-2 record.

Noted Albertville manager Paul Schumacher: "I don't know if any of us can catch up to Monticello at this point."

Boxscore Line of the Week

There were several worthy entries, but this issue's award goes to Monticello's Joe VanCulin. In the Polecats' May 20 win against Loretto, VanCulin had a career game, going 6-for-7 with 3 runs, 7 RBI, 3 doubles, and a HR.

The icing on the cake? 3.2 scoreless innings in relief for the win. Top that!

Hot starts

Dan Estrada, Litchfield
4-4 with 2 HRs and 7 RBI at Delano.

Andrew Carlson, D-C
9 IP, 2 ER, 13 strikeouts against Litchfield.

Kyle Kraska, Monticello
4-5 with 3 HRs and 7 RBI at Kingston.

Todd Klaers, Albertville
5-5, three runs, 3 RBI, 1 HR at Mound.

Kyle Krzmarzick, St. Michael
Newcomer from Sleepy Eye 5-6 with HR and 6 RBI against Loretto.

Not-so-hot starts

Ramon Vega, Albertville
Popping up, still looking for stroke.

Jeff Janzen, Delano
A surprising 1-3 record so far, but defense behind him hasn't exactly been a brick wall.

Kingston pitching
14.44 ERA through four games.