

# BATTER'S BOX

-16 Game Schedule

-One time matchups in 2024



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# NEW SCHEDULE FORMAT

Before we jump into 2024, we must give our congratulations to the 2023 Minnesota State Championship Maple Lake Lakers! What a run, going 6-0 and capturing its second state title since 2012. The bats got hot in Delano Labor Day weekend and Casey Pack managed the pitching rotation and matchups perfectly. The North Star League is in a great spot heading into 2024 after hosting the 100th Amateur State Tournament, teams going 11-3 at state, and adding a state title to the resume.

On to 2024. The schedule might look a tad lighter this summer, as the teams voted to move from a 22-game schedule to a 16-game schedule. No, the league is not splitting into two divisions, teams agreed to match up teams who finished odd in the 2023 standings to play each other twice, and even in the 2023 standings to play each other once. And the crossover teams once apiece, equalling 16 league games.

Quick breakdown:

Odds - Delano, Hutchinson, Buffalo, Maple Plain, Cokato, Rockford

Evens - Maple Lake, Loretto, Litchfield, Dassel-Cokato, Howard Lake, Waverly

There was much deep discussion at the fall meeting, with some push back, but all in all, the feedback was positive when everyone went home. Some of the negative feedback was the loss of three home games for each team could hurt teams season revenue, six less games to get players their minimum of four league games played to be eligible for postseason, six less games worth of statistics, and some of our oldest and best rivals will only matchup once during the regular season. On the flip side, the North Star League is its own Region (Region 12C), meaning teams are still going to run into one another 2-3 times during the year. Non-league games aren't hard to find with the number of teams and leagues surrounding the North Star League being plentiful, it gives everyone a shot to travel to different ballparks, play in tournaments, and show off our great ballparks playing different non-league competition. It also allows teams to load up on league games in June and July, when college age students are home, (ballplayers, and non-baseball players alike) and enables teams who rely on high school age players to maximize the summer months. Rockford is a great example of a team that should benefit from a heavy June-July schedule as they are only in their third year of existence, with a young roster, but a solid high school program filled with talented pitching. The more games they are able to use their young talent the better off they will be, and the better of the league as a whole. In the past, a matchup would look great on paper, and then team A would be on pitcher 4 or 5 for the week, and team B would roll out their ace. My matchup of the week would be more of a dud than a true swing game in the standings. Brian "Bookie" Larson stated the most compliments he received about scheduling was in the 2020 pandemic year where everyone played each other one time for a total of 10-league games. Buffalo ran the table, played only 1 or 2 non-league games and went the deepest of the league teams in state. Delano in 2020 tried playing 4-5 games a week and ended up getting 20 plus games before regions. You'll see some similarities with this schedule setup with teams. Some will keep it light outside of league play, and others will load up. And if the snow melts early this year Waverly will have a week's worth of games in before MLB teams finish Spring Training.

With the new setup, it gives us some intriguing one time matchups in the regular season. This is a perfect time to delve into some of those matchups.

**Delano at Maple Lake - Friday, July 19th - 7PM**

The defending state champions hosting the defending league/region champs meeting the final weekend of the regular season on Nate Johnson Hall of Fame night. Should be a packed crowd with both teams possibly vying for one of the top seeds if not the league championship.

**Hutchinson at Maple Lake - Sunday, June 16th - 1PM**

A Father's Day treat with two perennial league and state powerhouses. The two finished 2nd and 3rd in the regular season, and in the region and I don't see many scenarios where these two aren't fighting for the league title and number one seed come the end of July. Both teams have solid lineups, top to bottom, great pitching staffs, and tons of experience.

**Loretto v. Buffalo - Wednesday, June 12 - 7PM**

A replay of last years opening round region matchup that had Buffalo outlast Loretto in a thrilling Friday night game in Loretto. Larks ended up winning two to get back to state, while Buffalo fell short. These two matchup well with one another and have built a great highway 55 rivalry the past couple of seasons.

**Dassel-Cokato at Cokato - Friday, June 14 - 7PM**

With the way the schedule lays out our Bike Path Series is down to a best of one. D-C was able to end the Kernels season last year in the league playoffs by the final of 4-3 to send the Saints off to the Regions in Jordan Flick's first year as manager. Expect a great crowd and no love lost between these two on a Friday night over on Brooks Lake.

**Rockford v. Waverly - Wednesday, June 19 - 6:30PM**

Though these two have finished in the last two spots in the league, they will only play one time this year, and the tie breaker would award one team a home game in the league playoffs. I see Rockford taking another step this year, if they are able to get some young arms solid innings on the mound, they could easily wreck someone's season and or playoff seeding. They'll need to beat the sunset this Wednesday night in Waverly.

**Loretto at Maple Plain - Sunday, July 21 - 1PM**

The two teams that ruled the North Star League East from 2003-2011 clash only once in 2024. These two played for the final region spot in 2022, and both had big turnaround regular season's in 2023 making this one a standings shifter on the last day of the regular season. I don't know the outcome, but I bet it will be a hot afternoon in Maple Plain.

**Buffalo at Litchfield - Friday, July 19 - 7:30PM**

2021 and 2022 these two met in the first round of the Region playoffs with Buffalo winning in a barn burner in 2021, and Litchfield taking care of the Bulldogs on their home field during the 2022 playoffs. The two have essentially just missed state the past three years and both are looking at taking that final step to get back to state. This too has turned into a solid newer rivalry and I expect both teams to be near each other in the standings once we hit the final weekend of the regular season.