2012 MIAC Softball Season Preview & Preseason Coaches' Poll

Posted: Mar 27, 2012

ST. PAUL, Minn. -- During the 2011 softball season, St. Thomas completed a spectacular run through the Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (MIAC) with a 22-0 regular-season league record and a 3-0 record to add the MIAC Playoff title. As the 2012 season gets set to begin, head coach John Tschida's Tommies have again been tabbed as the favorite, but there will be plenty of intrigue as numerous contenders set their sights on dethroning UST.

The 2011 regular-season title was St. Thomas' second in a row, and 10th in 12 years, and the Tommies have been tabbed as the best bet to complete the three-peat this season, receiving 10 of the 12 first-place votes and 109 total points to lead the 2012 MIAC Softball Preseason Coaches' Poll. However, Gustavus - the last team other than St. Thomas to win the league - received the other two first-place votes and 102 points and appear to be a serious threat to the Tommies' title defense.

Saint Mary's scored 86 points in the poll to finish third and the coaches predicted Bethel would be the fourth and final Playoff team with 74 points. From there, the rest of the league slotted nicely into two very tight M. I. A. C.

Softball Preview & Coaches' Poll

groups. The first - also serious postseason contenders - was separated by just eight points. Hamline was fifth with 69, Augsburg sixth with 67 and St. Olaf and Saint Benedict tied for the seventh spot with 61 points apiece.

The final group in the poll was also extremely close, with just 1.5 points separating the final four teams in the preseason ranking. St. Catherine finished ninth with 25 points, Macalester was just a half-point back in 10th at 24.5, Carleton came in 11th with 24 points and Concordia rounded out the predictions in 12th with 23.5 points. Hopefully, the coaches are correct and the competitions throughout the conference are just as close as the poll predicts, which would result in another unforgettable season.

The Tommies' title defense certainly doesn't appear to be as easy as last season's perfect 25-0 record against MIAC opponents (42-6 overall) in the regular season and conference tournament. UST graduated MIAC Pitcher-of-the-Year Cassie Smith and two-time All-American OF Sydney Marquardt, and it appears MIAC Player-of-the-Year Kayla Boward will miss the 2011 season with an injury.

However, Tschida has appeared to reload once again with a deep talented team that has been ranked in the top 20 nationally. All-MIAC Honorable Mention catcher Emily Gregory headlines the returners and will be one of UST's leaders in 2012. Other position players of note include Jenna Hoffman (SS), Kimmy Hassel (2B), Gen Duffy (DH) and Alyssa Dunrud (OF). Tschida's pitching staff graduated its top two starters, but senior Christy Gries is back to lead the squad, and freshman Kendra Bowe has been especially good, earning the first MIAC Pitcher-of-the-Week honor of the season.

Gustavus was the clear-cut No. 2 team behind St. Thomas a year ago, finished second in the regular season and MIAC Playoffs, so the Gusties are hoping to replace the Tommies at the top of the standings in 2012. Three-time All-MIAC selection Lisa Klass moves from shortstop to 2B, and her leadership will be key with three freshman starters in the infield. All-Conference picks MacKenzie Dalton (INF) and Kate Rentschler (P/UTIL). Jen Ulmen also returns in the outfield and Sarah Rozell will give Rentschler support on the mound.

Saint Mary's is another team that said goodbye to a load of talent, but also still has plenty in the cupboard. All-MIAC outfielder Paige Carter is the Cardinals' top returner, along with All-MIAC Honorable Mention selection Erin Stenseth (OF/INF). SMU will also rely on Hailey Ohl (INF), Michelle Carne (OF), Nicole Olson (INF) and Kayla Peterson (P) to challenge for the league title and earn a repeat trip to the MIAC postseason.

Bethel just missed out on postseason play a year ago and hopes to return to the MIAC Playoffs in 2012. All-MIAC infielder Megan Matson is a big reason for optimism, and versatile Rachel Gilbert - an Honorable Mention pick in 2011 - earned MIAC Player-of-the-Week honors already this season for her performance. The Royals will also depend on Cristina Matsen, Jessica Newstrom and pitcher Genna Bock this season.

Hamline got a taste of the postseason last year with a trip to the MIAC Playoffs, and the Pipers are hungry for more with a strong returning nucleus, led by outfielder and table-setter Bethany Hine, who was an All-Conference pick in 2011. All-MIAC Honorable Mention utility player Laura Randall also returns and Jackie Brigl and Lauren Turitto add depth to the Hamline lineup. Brianna Vela and Lauren Clauston will handle the Hamline pitching duties this year.

Augsburg is another team that hopes to contend for a Playoff start with several talented returners back. Bri Dorale (CF), newcomer Lindsay Helbach and talented pitcher/infielder Kylee Persing lead the Auggies this season. St. Olaf could also be in the mix for the postseason with All-MIAC outfielder Julie Fergus leading the way. Jessica Green and Amy Prok will lead the Oles' pitching staff this season and Jessica Wilson, Maggie Wilson and Christiania Miller could be key in the St. Olaf lineup.

All-MIAC Honorable Mention selection Rachel Nelson will again be Saint Benedict's ace on the mound in 2012, and a big key to the Blazers' playoff hopes. Lexi Alm is expected to be Saint Benedict's top hitter and team leader this year. St. Catherine will be led by All-MIAC outfielder Alyssa Luedtke. The return of infielder Kaitlyn Frank after missing 2011 with an injury and speedster Jessica Kneifel give the Wildcats a talented core as they look for improvement in 2012.

Macalester opens a new era in 2012 as Jody Gabriel - last season's WIAC Coach-of-the-Year at UW-River Falls - takes over in the Scots' dugout. She has All-MIAC outfielder Cleo Nagy back to lead her squad and pitcher Amanda Knopf, Katie Fuller (C) and Courtney Nussbaumer (OF) could help Gabriel lead a big turnaround in her first season.

Carleton could also make big strides in 2012 starting with the return of MIAC Rookie-of-the-Year and All-Conference selection Jenny Ramey back in the infield. A pair of Honorable Mention selections - Jocelyn Friedman (C) and Kelsey Parsons (INF) - also return to give the Knights a formidable nucleus in the lineup, so a lot will ride on the performance of freshman pitchers Claire Willeck and Michaela LaRose.

Despite their last-place prediction in the Coaches' Poll, Concordia also has the tools to surprise some people this season, led by All-Conference pitcher Kesley Jones, who is back for her senior year. All-MIAC Honorable Mention 1B Kaia Sele also returns for the Cobbers, and Joelle Link, Kara Olmen and Emily Salo all flirted with .300 averages a year ago to give Concordia well-rounded lineup to support Jones.

The MIAC conference Opening Day is set for Wednesday, March 28, and - unlike last season - outdoor fields are ready to go at the start of conference play. The occasional rain-out in April is inevitable, but the 2012 has a much more optimistic outlook to stay on schedule after record-setting temperatures on almost a daily basis throughout March.

After completion of the 22-game MIAC schedule, the top four teams in the final conference standings will earn berths in the 2011 MIAC Softball Playoffs, where the conference's automatic bid to the 2012 NCAA Division III Softball Playoffs will be on the line. The double-elimination MIAC Playoffs will take place May 4-5, and will be hosted by St. Catherine and Hamline. This year, the entire event will be held at Rice Creek Park in Shoreview, Minn., which should create a great atmosphere for the conference's postseason.

The rest of the 2012 MIAC Softball Preview contains complete results from the 2012 MIAC Softball Preseason Coaches' Poll, information on the 2012 MIAC Playoffs, links to schedules, stats and more, and links to team-by-team previews for all 12 teams.

2012 MIAC Softball Preseason Coaches' Poll

Coaches voted for every team in the conference except their own team. Points were assigned for each vote (11 for first, 10 for second, etc.) Teams are ranked in order of highest point total to lowest with vote totals listed and first-place votes shown in parentheses.

2012 MIAC Softball					
Preseason Coaches' Poll					
Rank	Institution	Total			
1	St. Thomas (10)	109			
2	Gustavus (2)	102			
3	Saint Mary's	86			

4	Bethel	74
5	Hamline	69
6	Augsburg	67
7	St. Olaf	61
8	Saint Benedict	61
9	St. Catherine	25
10	Macalester	24.5
11	Carleton	24
12	Concordia	23.5

2012 MIAC Playoffs: Friday & Saturday, May 4-5 at Rice Creek Park, Shoreview, Minn. Host schools: St. Catherine University and Hamline University. Format: Top four teams, double elimination.

| 2012 MIAC Schedule | 2012 MIAC Statistics | MIAC Recordbook | MIAC Archives |

Skip to: $\underline{AUG} \mid \underline{BU} \mid \underline{CAR} \mid \underline{CON} \mid \underline{GAC} \mid \underline{HU} \mid \underline{MAC} \mid \underline{CSB} \mid \underline{SCU} \mid \underline{SMU} \mid \underline{STO} \mid \underline{UST} \mid$



2011 Finish: T-7th (9-13 MIAC, 20-20 overall) Augsburg Season Preview					

The Augsburg College softball team enters Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference play this week with a 5-11 record following its early-season tournament at Edor Nelson Field and 10 games in Tucson, Ariz. In its opening weeks, the Auggies have faced two nationally-ranked opponents and several strong regional squads.

There are some encouraging signs for Augsburg entering conference play, as the squad aims for its third straight 20plus-win season and the fourth in a five-year span under head coach Tim Gormley. The Auggies finished 20-20 last season, 9-13 in MIAC play.

Through 16 games, the Auggies have a .429 slugging percentage with 32 extra-base hits, including 13 home runs – on pace to shatter last year's total of 22, the most in Gormley's six-year tenure at Augsburg. Seven Auggie batters are hitting .200 or better, including four hitting .300 or better.

The Auggies have been led this season by leadoff hitter Bri Dorale (JR, Ramsey, Minn./Anoka HS), a centerfielder who has hit .426 (23-of-54) through the first 16 games of the year, to go along with 16 runs scored, five RBI, a .574 slugging percentage and a .456 on-base percentage. Her four stolen bases this season give her 45 on her career, already third-most in school history, and her .374 career batting average currently stands sixth-best.

Right behind her in batting average is newcomer Lindsay Helbach (FY, Amherst, Wis.), who is hitting .425 (17-of-40) with team-highs in RBI (18) and on-base percentage (.478), along with a strong .725 slugging percentage. Helbach has three doubles and three home runs so far this year. Helbach is a versatile player who has seen time at first base, left and right fields and pitcher so far this season.

Infielder Allyson Ruedy (JR, Waseca, Minn.) is having a breakout campaign in 2012, hitting .375 (18-of-48) with a team-high five home runs, 11 RBI, 13 runs scored and a team-best .729 slugging percentage.

Pitcher/infielder Kylee Persing (SR, Mound, Minn./Mound-Westonka HS), who earned MIAC Athlete of the Week honors twice last season, has been strong in both the pitching circle and at shortstop this year, with a .306 batting average (15-of-49), six extra-base hits (two doubles, one triple, three home runs) and nine RBI, along with a .571 slugging percentage. Her 10 career home runs are now third-best in school history. In the pitching circle, Persing has appeared in 12 of Augsburg's 16 games, with a 4-5 record and 30 strikeouts in 52 innings of work.

Two other returning starters – infielder Stephanie Saxe (SR, Stacy, Minn./North Branch HS) and outfielder Kelsey Rorabeck (JR, Hudson, Wis./Somerset HS), are also hitting over .200, as Rorabeck is hitting .222 with eight runs scored, and Saxe is hitting .209 with three doubles and eight RBI.

Joining Persing in the pitching circle is returner Devon Shaut (SO, Merritt Island, Fla.) and newcomers Helbach and Amanda Eaton (SO, White Bear Lake, Minn.), a transfer from St. Benedict. Eaton has pitched in 10 games this year with 15 strikeouts in 32.2 innings. Shaut has appeared in 23 games in her two seasons as an Auggie.



Bethel

Coach: Rod Radcliffe (8thh season)

2011 finish: T-4th (14-8 MIAC, 24-16 overall)

Bethel Season Preview

The Royals will be returning 11 players to the diamond after compiling an overall record of 24-16 in 2011. They will look for increased depth for the 2012 season as they welcome in 18 new student-athletes. Two of the newcomers come to BU via transfer, Tara Schinke (Long Lake, Minn.) and Alexandra Thunborg (Blaine, Minn.) will look to step in right away to contribute this spring. Head Coach Rod Radcliffe enters his eighth season at the helm of the softball program. Radcliffe has been in the softball coaching business for 30 years and with his experience he will look to guide the Royals to a MIAC conference championship.

Senior Genna Bock (Circle Pines, Minn.) will be looked upon to throw a majority of the innings this season and newcomer Melissa Palm (St. Joseph, Minn.) will also get some quality innings in the circle. Bock made 16 appearances during the 2011 season and finished with an 8-4 record while striking out 52 opponents.

Behind the plate the Royals will look upon sophomore Cristina Masten (Fergus Falls, Minn) to provide leadership throughout the spring. Masten, who is also a member of the women's hockey team, is making the transition from the ice to the dirt. Masten started 31 games last year as a freshman for the Royals and was also very productive at the plate as she hit .386 in 101 plate appearances in 2011.

The infield will be led by senior Jessica Pudwill (Detroit Lakes, Minn.) and junior Jessica Newstrom (Cambridge,Minn.) who both return from 2011. Newstrom will cover the "hot corner" as she will spend a majority of her time at third base. Newstrom is also making the transition from hockey to softball. Newstrom got the starting nod 38 times last season and also was over the .300 mark at the plate as she hit .328 in 116 appearances at the plate.

The outfield will be a strong suit for the squad as 2011 All-Conference junior Megan Matson (Mound, Minn.) and All-Conference Honorable Mention Rachel Gilbert (Becker, Minn.) return to left and center field respectively. At the plate last year Matson hit a blistering .395 in 124 at bats while committing only three errors in the field. Gilbert also hit over .300, as she finished with a batting average of .333. Gilbert also tied for the most round-trippers, as she knocked six over the fence a season ago. Senior Anja Erlandson (White Bear Lake, Minn.) will also spend significant time roaming the outfield and will also get some innings in pitching as well.

Coach's Outlook:

Coach Radcliffe is very optimistic about the 2012 season and is very excited about the group of players he returns this spring. He commenting by saying, "We have a lot more depth this season, yet we are very young, which means there is a lot of competition for positions." He also said, "Our JV program is very important to our program. We rely on our JV to fill the void through graduation and we like to say it is the next person in line to fill a position."

Batter Up!

The Royals already have two games under their belt as they opened up the season with a twin bill against Concordia University of Wisconsin and the University of Wisconsin-Stout. The team split the Saturday affair, as they knocked off the Falcons by a score of 8-6 and fell to the Blue Devils 12-3. The team will battle the Cobbers from Concordia College on Saturday in Rochester before they head south for a week of games and warm weather in Clermont, Florida.



Carleton

Coach: Amy Erickson (15th season)

2011 Finish: 10th (6-16 MIAC, 11-27 overall)

Carleton Season Preview

A year removed from posting its highest win total since 2006, the Carleton women's softball team enters the 2012 conference campaign looking to take the next step towards earning a postseason berth. The Knights return three players who were recognized by the MIAC for their 2011 efforts.

Shortstop Jenny Ramey (So./Cottage Grove, Minn./New Life Academy) returns after earning MIAC Rookie-of-the-Year honors by posting a .508 batting average and .815 slugging percentage during league games. On her way to shattering, Carleton single-season records, she posted a .463 overall batting average and five homeruns. She set the school record for hits (56) and runs (39) in a season.

An All-MIAC honorable selection a year ago, Kelsey Parsons (Jr./Golden Valley, Minn./Hopkins) will once again anchor the Knights' lineup. In 2011, she hit .375 and drove in 21 runs.

Jocelyn Friedman (Jr./Mount Kisco, N.Y./Fox Lane) was also an All-MIAC honorable selection last year after making huge strides at the plate during her sophomore season. 2011 saw her batting average jump to .391 and she blasted five homeruns to tie Ramey for the team lead.

The biggest question for the 2012 squad comes on the mound. In 2011, the team allowed over seven runs per game and opponents had a .365 batting average against the Knights' staff. This year, the Knights will rely on two freshmen, Claire Willeck (Eden Prairie, Minn.) and Michaela LaRose (Waconia, Minn./Holy Family), to patch up the pitching staff.



Concordia

Coach: Megan Johnson (4th season)

2011 Finish: T-7th (9-13 MIAC, 9-27 overall)

Concordia Season Preview

Enthusiastic and excited. Those are the two words that best describe Cobber head coach Megan Johnson as she enters her fourth season at the helm of Concordia.

The first reason for Johnson's optimism is the extended preseason practice and game schedule that should help the team get off to a quick start in 2012. For the past two seasons the Cobbers have started slow and then saved their best ball for the last 10 games of the season. This year, in addition to their annual spring break trip to Florida, Concordia has been able to have full outdoor practices since the beginning of March.

In addition to being able to get outside at an earlier date, the second reason for optimism this season is the influx of new players. The Cobbers feature seven freshmen on this year's roster and all seven have a chance to make a serious impact.

The final reason that Johnson is eager to start the northern portion of their 2012 schedule is the return of all nine starters from last season. Leading the way will be senior Kesley Jones and junior Kaia Sele. Jones earned All-Conference honors for the third straight season. She was the team's top pitcher for the third straight year and finished the season by ranking third in the league in strikeouts in conference games and second in innings pitched. Sele was the team's top power-hitting threat as she tied for third in the MIAC in home runs, second in RBI and fourth in slugging percentage. Sele hit .391 in league play and finished with six home runs, 26 RBI and a slugging percentage of .828. Sele also led the team in fielding percentage as she made only four errors in 154 chances as the team's starting first baseman.

The other top returning hitters from 2011 are Joelle Link, Kara Olmen and Emily Salo. All three players hit over .270 last year. Link was second on the team in average. She finished the year with a .311 average in all games and hit .371 in conference play. Olmen was fourth on the team in batting average while Salo was fifth. Both players also hit over .300 against MIAC opponents. Senior catcher Kayla Hendrickson will be counted on to continue the success she showed in league play in 2011. Hendrickson hit .305 in the team's 22 MIAC games and was third on the team in RBI.



Gustavus

Coach: Jeff Annis (7th season)

2011 Finish: 2nd (18-3-1 MIAC, 27-14-1 overall)

Gustavus Season Preview

After finishing second in the conference standings for the fifth time in the last six years last year, the Gustavus softball team is set to challenge perennial favorite St. Thomas for the 2012 MIAC crown. The Gusties went 27-14-1 overall and 20-3-1 in the MIAC last season.

Although the 2012 Gustavus softball team features many fresh faces, the Gusties can relay on a solid group of returners to anchor the team. Returning All-Conference performers Lisa Klass (Richfield, Minn.), MacKenzie Dalton (Edina, Minn.), and Kate Rentschler (Lakeville, Minn.) make up Gustavus' top returners. Klass, a three-time All-MIAC performer and just one of two seniors on the team, makes the transition from shortstop to second base for her senior season. Klass led the Gusties at the plate with a batting average of .388 (45-116) last season, hitting over .375 for the third time in her career. In 41 games, Klass recorded team-highs in hits (45), doubles (11), triples (2), walks (21), and on-base percentage (.482).

Rounding out the remaining spots of the infield will be a slew of first-year players. Taking over for Klass at short early on this season has been Shelby Nosan (Baudette, Minn.). She is complimented by fellow rookies Carly Klass (Richfield, Minn.) at third base and Kailey Morgan (Mound, Minn.) at first. Sophomore Emily Jasperson (Rochester, Minn.) will also provide depth at first base.

Junior MacKenzie Dalton will return to right field where she had a break-out season last year. Dalton ranked second on the team in hitting last season with a batting average of .371 (26-70). She also led the squad in outfield assists with 13, registering a fielding percentage of .938.

Joining Dalton in the outfield will be junior Jen Ulmen (Hokah, Minn.) and sophomore Brittany Brenke (Le Sueur, Minn.). Ulmen came on strong at the end of last year to lead the team in slugging percentage (.726) and finish fifth in batting average (.357). Brenke recorded 45 at-bats last season, hitting .311 (14-45).

Junior Kate Rentschler returns as Gustavus' ace for the 2012 campaign. Rentschler went 17-8 (11-1 MIAC) with an ERA of 3.31 last season. At the plate, Rentschler hit .324 with nine doubles, four home runs, and 24 RBI. Head Coach Jeff Annis expects newcomer Sarah Rozell (Lakeville, Minn.) to compliment Rentschler this season.

Splitting responsibilities behind the plate will be junior Sam Breneman (Sherburn, Minn.) and Kat Dahl (Luverne, Minn.). Both saw limited playing time last season, but will both be expected to fill a void left due to the graduation of All-Conference performer Dani Cattrysse.



Coach: Jim Rubbelke (5th season)

2011 Finish: T-4th (14-8 MIAC, 21-19 overall)

Hamline Season Preview

With ten freshmen and only one senior on the roster and the likelihood of five fresh faces in the starting lineup, HU softball coach Jim Rubbelke is sure of just one thing about the 2012 season: there will be some serious mixing and matching of personnel in the early going.

"There's no way to find out what works until we actually get on the field for a few games," said the fifth-year head coach. "We have some very good people returning but we will definitely need some of the new players to step up and take a role. Our goal is to get back to the playoffs."

In 2011, the Pipers went on a late-season tear, winning their last six conference games to qualify for the MIAC tournament with a 14-8 league mark (21-19 overall). To repeat that feat, they will have to do so with perhaps as many as five freshmen in the lineup.

Fortunately, there are some familiar faces, too. Bethany Hine, a junior, was named to the All-MIAC team last year after finishing fifth in the league in batting last year with a .417 average. Hine also ranked second in triples and fourth in runs scored and tied for the team lead in stolen bases with 12. "She's our table-setter," Rubbelke said.

Hine will anchor the outfield in center field. Laura Randall, a junior who swatted .350 last year, hit four home runs and also stole a dozen bases, is also back. Fresh off a hockey season, Randall's position in the field is still to be determined. "It will probably depend on how some of the new players do," Rubbelke said. "Laura can play several different positions."

Jackie Brigl (who also played hockey) and Lauren Turitto, also hit .300 plus and started 30 or more games last year. Brigl caught last year but is currently slated to play on the infield. Turitto may split time between right field and first base.

But that leaves several positions to be decided. Katie Koren, a freshman from Tartan, will get a look at catcher in the early going. Another freshman who may make an immediate impact is Jenna Dushaw, an all-stater last year on a state tournament team at St. Paul Johnson. Elaina Hamann, who played at St. Anthony Village, is also expected to compete for a fly chaser spot.

The biggest loss from the 2011 team might have been Kelsey Tacheny, who threw 17 complete games in going 15-9 on the mound. A pair of sophomore righties – Brianna Vela and Lauren Clauston – saw action in 15 and 12 games respectively and is expected to shoulder the majority of the pitching duties. In 2011, Vela exhibited excellent control, walking just five batters in 49.1 innings while Clauston recorded 27 strikeouts in 48.2 innings.

"Our goal is to have an established lineup by the time the conference season begins (March 28 at St. Thomas)," Rubbelke said. "This will be different than any team we have had here," he said. "I will be learning from them and, hopefully, they will be learning from me."



Macalester

Coach: Jody Gabriel (1st season)

2011 Finish: 12th (1-21 MIAC, 8-30 overall)

Macalester Season Preview

New head coach Jody Gabriel comes to Macalester from Wisconsin-River Falls, where she was named WIAC coach of the year and led the Falcons to last year's NCAA playoffs and is looking to rebuild the Scots after last season's 1-21 MIAC campaign. She'll be working with one of the league's youngest teams.

Center fielder Cleo Nagy (So., Eugene, Ore. / Henry D. Sheldon) returns after leading the Scots in most statistical categories a year ago, including batting average (.355), hits (38), doubles (12) home runs (4), runs driven in (21), runs scored (17) and slugging percentage (.579). Her batting average never dipped below .316 at any point last season.

Pitcher Amanda Knopf (Sr., Boulder, Colo.) returns for her fourth year in the circle for the Scots. She enters her senior campaign with 246 career strikeouts in 307 innings pitched. Knopf is also a candidate to be the team's leadoff batter.

Also returning to help provide veteran leadership for the young Scots is catcher Katie Fuller (So., Boulder, Colo.), who batted .257 with 17 RBI and 15 runs scored. Several other returners should compete for positions, including outfielder Courtney Nussbaumer (Jr., Brookfield, Wis. / East) and infielder/outfielder Allie Dautrich (So., Mansfield Center, Conn. / E.O. Smith).

Through the season's first 12 games, Nagy is a .400 hitter with five home runs and Knopf has a 1.70 ERA.

Macalester's rookies will also play a big part in the team's success in 2012.

As the team returns from its Spring Break trip, outfielder/pitcher Miranda Stokes (Fy., Perry, Utah / Box Elder) is batting .406 through 12 games with two homers and a .719 slugging percentage for the 7-5 Scots. She also has a 3.05 ERA and 20 strikeouts through 20 innings in the circle. At third base, Hali Englert (Fy., Castle Rock, Colo. / Castle View) is hitting .308 and playing solid defense to start her career.

Other key Mac prospects include first baseman Erin Slater (Fy., Federal Way, Wash. / Decatur), shortstop Anna Munson (Fy., LaCrosse, Wis. / Central), outfielder Tara Cayton (Fy., Pleasanton, Calif. / Amador Valley) and infielder Maddy Jasper (Fy., Corona, Calif. / Santiago).



Saint Benedict

Coach: Denny Johnson (26th season)

2011 Finish: 6th (12-10 MIAC, 16-20 overall)

Saint Benedict Season Preview

Head Coach Denny Johnson, in his 26th year, returns to the field after clinching his 500th career win as the College of Saint Benedict Blazer softball team looks to make a run to the MIAC Playoffs.

After finishing the 2011 campaign with a 16-20 overall record and a 12-10 conference mark, the Blazers return one all-conference player from last year in sophomore Rachel Nelson. Nelson led all CSB pitchers with a 4.01 ERA and nine wins as she was named to the MIAC honorable mention team. Other top players coming back from last year's sixth place squad include sophomore outfielder Lexi Alm. Alm has a hit in each of the Blazers games so far this season and has compiled an impressive .563 batting average.

With young, talented and experienced players, the Blazers are confident in their efforts to improve and become a tough out against their MIAC opponents.



St. Catherine

Coach: Madge Makowske (17th season)

2011 Finish: 11th (2-19-1 MIAC, 7-30-1 overall)

St. Catherine Season Preview

The St. Kate's softball team is excited about the challenges ahead. Head coach Madge Makowski says the team will have a slightly different look from last year. With the return of senior infielder, Kaitlyn Frank from injury a year ago and some new faces who will fight to find a role in the lineup, the Wildcats have high hopes for a successful season. This year's squad will be "a little more road tested" than teams of the recent past, with a good number of returners who got significant playing time last year. Jessica Kniefel returns after finishing fifth in the nation in stolen bases and an excellent batting average. Alyssa Luedtke was the team's lone All-Conference honoree a year ago and boasts the highest batting average on the team and one of the best in the conference. The pitchers look to step up their games as well moving forward with hopes of finishing in the top four in the conference.



Saint Mary's

Coach: Jen Miller (6th season)

2011 Finish: 3rd (15-7 MIAC, 23-16 overall)

Saint Mary's Season Preview

After graduating four starting infielders from last season's squad, Saint Mary's University fastpitch softball coach Jen Miller thinks most teams will assume the Cardinals will be in a rebuilding year in 2012.

And she hopes that is the case.

"I'm really hoping other teams underestimate us this season," Miller said. "Because I think we are going to surprise a lot of people.

"We definitely graduated some key players from last year's team, but we also brought in some very talented players and we aren't willing to just sit back and call this a rebuilding year," Miller added. "Our goals are to get right back into the conference tournament again this season."

The Cardinals went 23-16 a year ago, including a 16-9 showing in the Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference—and a third-place finish in the conference's post-season tournament.

If SMU is going to make a return trip to the post-season, they are going to have to find a replace Mallory Betzold, Katy Gannon, Kellie Simons and Joanna Mangan — and their rather impressive statistical numbers.

Betzold was an All-MIAC and All-Region pitcher/first baseman who hit .368 and threw 130 innings for SMU in 2011. Gannon, who started every game at shortstop for SMU the last four years, posted a .350 batting average last season. Simons, who played third base most of her career, hit .268, while Mangan shared catching duties, batted .356 and was named All-MIAC honorable mention. Betzold, Simons and Gannon were all also named to the All-MIAC Tournament Team in the final games of their collegiate careers.

"It will be tough to replace Mal, Katy, Kellie and Jo," said Miller, who is in her sixth year coaching the Cardinals. "They were all a huge part of our infield, big hitters in our lineup and great leaders for this team."

But the Cardinals' cupboard is far from bare.

Junior Paige Carter (Rosemount, Minn.) will be back in the outfield this season. She was named to All-MIAC First Team and All-Region Third Team last season after hitting a team-high .413. Junior outfielder Erin Stenseth (Eau Claire, Wis.) was All-MIAC honorable mention last season and All-Region as a freshman. She hit .328 last season with seven home runs.

Other starters who hit above .250 last season include junior infielder Hailey Ohl (Bloomington, Minn. / .358), senior outfielder Michelle Carne (Escanaba, Mich. / .323) and senior infielder Nicole Olson (New Brighton, Minn. / .252).

Junior Kayla Peterson (Lewiston, Minn.) will handle the majority of the pitching duties this season, while junior Julie Bartosz (Mokena, III.), who played in 17 games last season, will help take over catching responsibilities.

"We have some very talented players back this season," Miller said. "And we brought in some quality freshmen who will help us right away."

Miller expects a few of those freshmen to be in the starting lineup on opening day and is also excited about the addition of transfer Anna Ramboldt (Goodhue, Minn.), who was a two-time All-American at Rochester Community and Technical College.

"We have a lot of reasons to be optimistic," Miller said. "The players are working very hard and are excited to see what we can do this season."

Perhaps Miller's greatest challenge will be juggling the lineup and trying to find the right combination of players before the conference season starts.

"There will probably be a lot of lineup changes early on," she said. "We have a lot of people that can play multiple positions for us and we are going to have a lot of options.

"I like that other teams aren't going to know a lot about us this season," she said. "We're going to use that to our advantage and, hopefully, land ourselves back in the conference tournament."



St. Olaf

Coach: Ruthie Neuger (8th season)

2011 Finish: T-7th (9-13 MIAC, 14-24 overall)

St. Olaf Season Preview

The St. Olaf College softball team has several key pieces back this season in search of a MIAC playoffs berth.

Off to an 8-6 start through March 23 amidst a tough non-conference schedule, the Oles have relied on solid pitching thus far. The duo of Jessica Green and Amy Prok have carried most of the load. Green has a 1.11 ERA in seven starts, going 3-2 with five complete games. Prok is 3-3 with a 1.58 ERA. Danielle Collins has provided solid relief innings, going 2-0 with a 1.70 ERA in four appearances.

Jessica Wilson anchors the middle of the lineup. Wilson is hitting .350 with a pair of homers with team bests in RBIs (11), hits (14) and slugging percentage (.600). She, Maggie Scholer and Christiania Miller have been the most consistent at the plate so far. Scholer is hitting .333 with a team-high six doubles and Miller .350. Kayla Gronli is off to a good start as well, hitting .306 in 36 at bats.

St. Olaf has used a number of combinations on the infield, but Mackenzie Wolter is the team's mainstay at short. Kari and Esti Zimmerman have logged the most innings at third and second base and Haley Schreier at first. The Oles have also used Miller at a few spots on the infield.

In the outfield Wilson, Julie Fergus, Amy Jeppesen and Gronli will eat up most of the innings.

Miller and Scholer have split the catching duties thus far.



St. Thomas

Coach: John Tschida (12th season)

2011 Finish: 1st (22-0 MIAC, 42-6 overall)

St. Thomas Season Preview

With 11 freshmen and 10 sophomores plus only two seniors on a 28-player roster, Tommie softball will have one of its youngest teams in memory when the MIAC season starts next week.

Last season, only NCAA champ Linfield had more wins among Division III teams than UST (42-6). St. Thomas made the NCAA playoffs for the 14th time in the last 15 seasons, finished as regional tourney runner-up, and posted the program's eighth consecutive 40-win season. After a slow start with a young team and inexperienced pitching, UST won 31 games in a row before taking two losses to Luther at the NCAA regional playoffs.

That 2011 team made a 25-0 run through the conference -- the fourth such unbeaten season for Tommie softball in the last eight seasons. The Tommies averaged eight runs a game and batted .377 as a team, with eight starters hitting over .385. Ten different players had at least one home run, and the team committed only 47 errors in 48 games.

But the Tommies graduated seven seniors in 2011, including two-time All-American OF Sydney Marquardt. And it appears that 2011 MIAC Player of the Year Kayla Boward, a senior 3B, will miss the 2012 season with an injury.

St. Thomas has a 10-4 record through March 20 games and has been ranked in the top 20 nationally. UST is led in 2012 by sophomore catcher Emily Gregory (2011: 44 games, .730 slugging %, 9 HRs, 46 hits, 47 RBI, 15 walks, 14 doubles, no errors in 100 defensive chances); soph SS Jenna Hoffman (2011: 33 hits, 17 walks, .295 BA, 34 runs); junior 2B Kimmy Hassel (2B); soph DH Gen Duffy (three homers, 22 RBI, 10 walks and a .304 batting average); and soph OF Alyssa Dunrud (2011: 40 games, .416 BA, 19 steals, 32 runs).

On the mound, UST graduated Biz Sitzmann and Cassie Smith, but returns senior Christy Gries, who pitched in 17 games last season; and sophomore LHP Kristin Bigelbach. RHPs Kendra Bowe and Treya Connell lead a group of promising freshmen.

Tschida came into 2012 with the top winning percentage among all coaches in NCAA softball or baseball history with his 655-112 career record (.854). His teams at St. Mary's (1995-2000) and UST have won all eight MIAC postseason playoff championships contested and 12 of 17 regular-season crowns.

The Tommies are scheduled to open MIAC play vs. Hamline on March 28 on campus, where they are 61-1 since April 2005. The Toms have won 42 consecutive games vs. conference opponents since a game-two loss to St. Mary's in April 2010.