

2008 MIAC Softball Season Preview

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Great pitcher's duals, extra-inning slugfests, and a heated battle for the four playoff berths will likely come to define the MIAC Softball season once again. As has been the case in the past, all 12 MIAC teams should be able to challenge for the four spots into the double elimination MIAC Playoffs. When the snow finally melts, the action will heat up on fields across the state to determine who is tops in the MIAC.

Four-time reigning MIAC champion St. Thomas is coming off a 22-0 MIAC regular season and will once again be the team to beat in the MIAC. Coach John Tschida graduated two-time All-American Carrie Embree, but the Tommies return two-time All-American pitcher/first baseman Maria Bye, the MIAC Pitcher and Player of the Year in 2007. Tschida is the winningest coach in NCAA Division III softball with a 13-year head coaching mark of 491-87 (.849).

Gustavus looks to once again compete for the conference title after finishing second in the league with a 20-2 record last season. Head coach Jeff Annis' squad brings a blend of experience and youth to the field as the Gusties look to make their second consecutive appearance in the NCAA Tournament. The Golden Gusties return the middle of their defense as all-region players Julie Mahre, Rachael Click, and Emily Klein are back for another season.

Saint Mary's will hope to make their fourth consecutive trip to the MIAC Playoffs in 2008. Coach Jen Miller's squad will have a new look this season as the Cardinals graduated a strong senior class, but bring in a talented group of first-year players. Saint Mary's will lean on the veteran leadership of senior Jenny Giannini and junior outfielders Cassie Otte and Danielle Geske.

Saint Benedict will challenge for one of the four spots in the MIAC Playoffs again in 2008. The Blazers have finished in the top five in the conference standings each year since 1988. Saint Benedict graduated five senior starters from last season's team. The Blazers will turn to infielder Nicki Holmes, the sole senior on the team, for leadership in 2008.

First-year head coach Jim Rubbelke takes over a Hamline team that finished fourth in the MIAC Standings in 2007 and qualified for the MIAC Playoffs for the third team in four years. Infielder Sara Mickelson is the lone senior on the 2008 Piper roster.

The biggest key for Concordia in 2008 will be how well last year's freshmen can step up and be counted on as team leaders in their sophomore year of play. The Cobbers could start as many as five sophomores this season. The biggest second-year starter will be pitcher Erin Johnson who will take over as the team's No.1 starting pitcher. The field players will be led by senior Amanda Johnson who is a three-year starter at second base.

St. Catherine head coach Madge Makowske will look to sophomore All-MIAC performer Kayla Webster to lead the Wildcats after two-time All-MIAC selection Jess Lewandowski graduated. In addition to Webster, Makowske will look to junior catcher Jessi McGehee to be a leader for this young Wildcat team. St. Catherine has only one senior on this season's roster, but has seven first-year players who will be looked at to make significant contributions.

St. Olaf will have a few key tools to build around in hopes of moving north in the MIAC standings. Fourth year head coach Ruthie Neuger has a pair of offensive threats that will solidify her 2007 lineup card – Ali Berens and Emily Hennig. Berens, a sophomore, led the team in almost every offensive category in her rookie season and was the Oles' only pick on the MIAC's all-conference team. Hennig has been a mainstay in the team's lineup since her arrival in 2005.

Youth will continue to dominate the Bethel team in 2008 as 22 of the 29 athletes are first or second-year players. The Royals do return the top two pitchers from last year's team in Nea Harkness and Charitey Rowden. Both offensively and defensively, one of Bethel's greatest strengths will be found in All-MIAC catcher Molly Trombley.

Carleton's roster is smaller than in year's past, yet the team has a solid mix of veteran leadership and experience to go along with youthful energy and athleticism. Leading the way are senior Elise Johnson, junior Emily Maland and sophomore Michael Johnson. There will be only 11 players available to head coach Amy Tenute for the 2008 season.

Macalester fielded a lineup made up mostly of first-year players last season and this year's sophomore-led team is looking to continue to lead the program in a new direction. The young Scots do have a veteran presence in All-MIAC leadoff batter senior Katie Grudnowski. The pitcher/catcher battery of honorable mention All-MIAC picks Olivia Abbott and Crystal Barriga were a pair of the league's top newcomers a year ago.

Augsburg will look to continue its improvement under second year head coach Tim Gormley. Four of the five returning starters for

the Auggies are in the infield, keyed by the returning battery of senior catcher Ashley Westerman and junior pitcher Sarah Green. The middle of the Auggie infield is an experienced one, as starting second-baseman junior Tiffany Magnuson and senior shortstop Jolene Ross return.

MIAC Preseason Coaches' Poll: 1. St. Thomas, 2. Gustavus, 3. Saint Mary's, 4. Saint Benedict, 5. Hamline, 6 (tie). Concordia, 6 (tie). St. Catherine, 8. St. Olaf, 9. Bethel, 10. Carleton, 11. Macalester, 12. Augsburg

2008 MIAC Playoffs: Top four teams (double elimination) - Friday & Saturday, May 2-3 at Rice Creek Complex, Mounds View (Hosted by Augsburg & St. Catherine)

Augsburg

Coach: Tim Gormley (2nd season)

2007 Finish: 12th (3-19 MIAC, 4-34 overall)

Augsburg Athletes to Watch
Tiffany Magnuson (INF/OF)
Jolene Ross (INF)
Sarah Green (P/INF)
Ashley Westerman (C/INF)
Whitney Restemayer (OF)
Sarah Mueller (OF)

Augsburg Season Preview
<p>For the Augsburg College softball team, progress and improvement can be measured in a few simple steps. First step -- improve from the beginning of the season to the end. Second step -- improve the team's competitiveness in games. Third step -- improve from last season's 4-34 overall record and 3-19 mark in the Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference. Final step -- finish among the top four teams in the MIAC, earning a trip to the postseason playoffs.</p> <p>"My main goal every year is to have our players playing a lot better by the end of the year," said Tim Gormley, entering his second season as Augsburg's head coach. "That's always been my main goal. If they continue to improve, and if they're 100 times better by the end of the year, then my goal would be reached. If they're doing that, then hopefully they're enjoying the game a lot more, and they have a lot more knowledge of the game. It goes back to my teaching. I love teaching the game."</p> <p>Last season, Augsburg had 12 of its 38 games decided by one or two runs, and went 1-11 in those contests. This season, a key goal is to become more competitive in the close games, Gormley noted.</p> <p>"We had so many one-run games that could have went either way," Gormley said. "Last year, what we didn't get, and what we hope to get more of this year, is the key hit at the key time when people are on-base."</p> <p>Five starters return to the Augsburg lineup, combined with some young talent in both the infield and outfield.</p> <p>Four of the five Auggie starters returning are in the infield, keyed by the returning battery of catcher Ashley Westerman (SR, Bemidji, Minn.) and pitcher Sarah Green (JR, Winnebago, Minn./Blue Earth Area HS).</p> <p>Westerman returns for her second full year as a starter, and has developed a reputation as one of the top catchers in the conference. Behind the plate, she had a .944 fielding percentage (10 errors in 179 chances), with just 11 passed balls last season. And as a hitter, she put together a .236 average with a team-high 14 runs batted in.</p>

"I've had the fortunate experience of working with a lot of leaders, and she's definitely way up there, especially doing the things off the field as a leader," Gormley said. "On the field, I think she's one of the best catchers in the MIAC. You're not going to see a better catcher blocking balls, which encourages the pitchers to feel comfortable. She's a very smart person, very observant and a student of the game."

Green pitched 53 percent of the team's innings last season, striking out 67 while walking 51 in 124.1 innings of work, building a 4.56 earned-run average and .332 opponent batting average. Entering this season, Green will be expected to pitch the bulk of the team's innings, though newcomer Melissa Larsen (JR, Andover, Minn.) will also be a part of the pitching rotation.

"Last year was the first year that she was given the No. 1 pitching role, and I think she did a nice job of taking that role and making it hers," Gormley said. "I like the 1-2 punch that we've got in Sarah and Melissa. Sarah has become comfortable, and the team is comfortable when they see her in the circle."

The middle of the Auggie infield is an experienced one, as starting second-baseman Tiffany Magnuson (JR, Green Bay, Wis.) and shortstop Jolene Ross (SR, Arden Hills, Minn./Mounds View HS) return. Both are coming off of all-conference seasons, as Magnuson earned All-MIAC first-team honors for the second straight year, while Ross earned All-MIAC honorable-mention honors, after being named a first-team selection in 2005.

As the team's versatile leadoff hitter, Magnuson led the team with a .377 batting average, ranking 10th among MIAC players in overall statistics last season. She also led the team with 43 hits, nine doubles and 15 stolen bases, along with team-bests in slugging percentage (.456) and on-base percentage (.427). Her .968 fielding percentage (five errors in 158 chances) was also a team-best.

"She's as quick as cat. She loves to field the ball, and when you have a second baseman in softball, you need someone who can go laterally very quickly, and she can do that," Gormley said. "She can knock a ball out of the park, but she can also lay down a bunt, and she can slap. She's a triple threat when it comes to her at-bats."

Ross played both shortstop and outfield last season, and finished second on the team with a .337 batting average in the No. 2 spot in the lineup. A slap hitter at the beginning of her career, she has broadened her hitting stroke and has emerged as a team leader, Gormley said.

"Joey brings us great leadership. She's probably one of the toughest kids I've ever worked with. She absolutely loves the game," Gormley said.

The corner infield spots will be filled with newcomers. Newcomer Jennifer Castillo (FY, Minneapolis, Minn./Washburn HS) will fill the third-base spot, while Larsen, Green and Ashley Whittenburg (FY, Brooklyn Center, Minn.) will share time at first base.

In the outfield, there will be several new faces, with just one starter returning in leftfielder Whitney Restemayer (SO, Bemidji, Minn.). Restemayer hit .255 last season with two homers and seven doubles. Her .396 slugging percentage was second-best on the team.

"Whitney brings athleticism to her position. She takes good swings at the ball, and she has the potential to be all-conference every year, with her ability," Gormley said.

Returner Sarah Mueller (JR, Green Bay, Wis./Southwest HS) will likely fill the right-field spot. Mueller battled arm injuries that limited her to pinch-running duties for most of last season, as she appeared in just 15 games. But she has returned healthy and has shown strong improvement, particularly in her ability to bunt and slap-hit the ball, Gormley said.

In center field, newcomer Jessa Hinz (FY, Richfield, Minn.) will be the likely starter, while returner Katie Johnson (SR, Montrose, Minn./Wayzata HS) and newcomer Laura Strandell (FY, Pine Island, Minn.) will also compete for time in the outfield.

Bethel

Coach: Rod Radcliffe (4th season)

2007 Finish: 11th (5-17 MIAC, 16-22-2 overall)

Bethel Athletes to Watch

Molly Trombley (C, Sr., Stacy, Minn.)

Lauren Habisch (OF, So., Lakeville, Minn.)

Laura Naig (C, Sr., Kasson, Minn.)

Amber Beasley (Jr., Medina, Minn.)

Nea Harkness (P, So., Winthrop, Minn.)

Charitey Rowden (P, So., Shellsburg, Iowa)

Bethel Season Preview

One huge goal has been met this season with the addition of a Junior Varsity team. This is the first time in school history the softball team has had a JV squad. This will create competition on the practice field and also will let everyone on the team have a chance to compete in games. Youth will continue to dominate the team. 22 of the 29 athletes are 1st or 2nd year players. With this type of team, competition for positions in practice will determine who will get the most playing time on varsity.

Radcliffe states, "We are still a young team but 11 letter winners return for the season. Again we will rely heavily on our 4 seniors and 3 juniors to lead this team. We are really looking forward to the softball season. We will have a great spring trip to Florida. Our goals remain high to compete in the upper division of the conference."

The team returns its top two pitchers from last year's team in Nea Harkness (Winthrop, Minn.) and Charitey Rowden (Shellsburg, Iowa). Also returning are Jennifer Lundgren (West Fargo, N.D.), Kelsey Simmons (Guernsey, Wyo.), and Chelsea Kopca (Andover, Minn.) whose injuries kept them out all of last year. Others vying for playing time are Sarah Modak (Califon, N.J.), Rebecca Akerson (Lakeville, Minn.), Ashley Davis (Owatonna, Minn.), and Lindsay Wright.

One of the team's strengths this season is our catching staff. All-MIAC Captain Molly Trombley (Stacy, Minn.) and Co-Captain Laura Naig (Kasson, Minn.) will be part of the battery plus play other positions. Backing up these two seniors is Ashley Lindberg (Sartell, Minn.) and Michelle Wilson (Anoka, Minn.). Last years catching staff really handled a young pitching staff well and helped our pitchers out a lot during games and practice times.

Numerous players have a chance to fill first base in an effort to replace Dani Larson who anchored the position for 4 years. Captain Amber Beasley (Medina, Minn.) will be back at second base, part-time starter Tonia Erickson (Welcome, Minn.) returns to third base, while returning starter Joslin Geisler (Grand Rapids, Minn.) will have 2 new shortstops trying to win her position.

The infield may see many different players on the field this season. We will have the practices to determine who will play at each position. Some positions are up for grabs and some are set if they win their spots. There is a very talented group of young ladies that will compete for the infield positions.

After graduating Hannah Subich, two starters still return to the outfield. Lauren Habisch (Lakeville, Minn.) and Karina Roe (Grey Eagle, Minn.). Others competing for this position will be Annie Beasley (Medina, Minn.), Lisa Patnode (Princeton, Minn.), and Angie Ohman (St. Anthony, Minn.). "Our outfield play has improved each year I've been here," said Radcliffe, "and we have the talent to keep improving at this position."

Carleton

Coach: Amy Tenute (10th season)

2007 Finish: Tied 9th (6-16 MIAC, 10-28 overall)

Carleton Athletes to Watch
Michael Johnson (So., Minneapolis, Minn./Blake) – INF
Emily Maland (Jr., Brattleboro, Vt.) – P/INF
Elise Johnson (Sr., Grantsburg, Wis.) – OF
Rhemi Abrams-Fuller (Sr., Spokane, Wash./Ferris) – 3B/OF
B.G. Green (Fy., McLean, Vir./Potomac School) – OF/C
Merrit Swain (So., Mendota Heights, Minn./St. Paul Academy) – INF/OF

Carleton Season Preview
<p>The Carleton College softball team roster is smaller than in year's past, yet the team has a solid mix of veteran leadership and experience to go along with youthful energy and athleticism. Leading the way are senior Elise Johnson (Grantsburg, Wis.), junior Emily Maland (Brattleboro, Vt.) and sophomore Michael Johnson (Minneapolis, Minn./Blake).</p> <p>There are only 11 players available to head coach Amy Tenute, which limits her ability to make situational substitutions. This forces each Knight to be able to play multiple positions well. Expect Carleton to improve as the season progresses and players are able to settle into their roles.</p> <p>The Knights will be led by sophomore Michael Johnson (Minneapolis, Minn./Blake). As a first-year, she paced the team in batting average, home runs and slugging percentage, and was second in RBI. Emily Maland (Jr./ Brattleboro, Vt.) will be especially important to this year's team, because not only will she need to continue her strong batting performance, but she also steps out from behind the plate and into the top spot on the pitching staff.</p> <p>Elise Johnson (Sr./Grantsburg, Wis.) will split time at shortstop and pitcher this season. She paced the team in hits and had a .379 on-base percentage a year ago. Rhemi Abrams-Fuller (Sr./Spokane, Wash./Ferris), Lisa Friedman (Jr./Pasadena, Calif./Flintridge Prep) and Andrea Duron (Jr./Claremont, Calif./Vivian Webb) will be major contributors to the Knights effort this year. All three posted solid batting averages and each will be relied on heavily in the coming year. Expect the Knights to improve as the season progresses and players are able to settle into their roles.</p> <p>Joining this season are four newcomers, including B.G. Green (Fy./McLean, Vir./Potomac School) who may see time at both centerfield and catcher. She's possess a strong throwing arm and covers a lot of ground in the outfield. Green will likely find her name at the top of the lineup card.</p> <p>Merrit Swain (So./Mendota Heights, Minn./St. Paul Academy) brings added versatility as she can play both middle infield positions and the outfield.</p> <p>This year's version of the Knights will be without All-MIAC pitcher Mari Jo Long, who is studying abroad during the spring term. Pitching will be a question mark for the Knights this season because Long and Liesl Van Ryswyk were the only Carleton pitchers to see substantial innings last year and neither will be pitching this season.</p>

Concordia

Coach: Stacey Holm (6th season)

2007 Finish: Tied 7th (8-14 MIAC, 12-22 overall)

Concordia Athletes to Watch

Amanda Johnson (Sr., 2B, Grey Eagle, Minn./Long Prairie-Grey Eagle)

Erin Johnson (So., P, West Fargo, N.D.)

Laura Johnson (Jr., 1B, Rochester, Minn./Mayo)

Amanda Michaelson (Jr., 3B/C, Shoreview, Minn./Mounds View)

Concordia Season Preview

The biggest key for the Concordia fastpitch softball team in 2008 will be how well last year's freshmen can step up and be counted on as team leaders in their sophomore year of play. The Cobbers could start as many as five sophomores this season and all will be counted if CC is going to better last year's seventh-place finish.

The biggest second-year starter will be pitcher Erin Johnson (So., West Fargo, N.D.) who will take over as the team's No.1 starting pitcher. Last year she led the team in earned run average with a 3.53 mark. She only started four games in 2007 but will be handed the ball in the majority of games in 2008. Her ability to keep batters guessing with her off-speed pitches will give the Cobbers a chance to stay in every game. She showed glimpses of successful collegiate pitching last year when she pitched a complete game against Hamline. In the game against the Pipers, who earned one of the four spots in the MIAC Tournament, Johnson gave up only two earned runs and six hits.

Pitching depth will be one of the shortcomings of the Cobbers in 2008. After Erin Johnson, the only other player on the team with pitching experience is Becki Zimmerman (So., Chokio, Minn./Chokio-Alberta HS). Zimmerman has only pitched in 3.2 innings in her collegiate career.

The field players will be led by senior Amanda Johnson (Grey Eagle, Minn./Long Prairie-Grey Eagle HS) who is a three-year starter at second base. Johnson hit .270 last year and in 2006 led the team in slugging percentage home runs and total bases. Joining Johnson as an anchor in the infield will be corner infielders Amanda Michaelson (Jr., Shoreview, Minn./Mounds View HS) and Laura Johnson (Jr., Rochester, Minn./Rochester Mayo HS). Michaelson is a two-year starter who committed only seven errors in almost 100 chances last year at the hot corner last year. Her experience on the left side of the infield will help freshman shortstop Jamie Odden (West Fargo, N.D.) who replaces two-time MIAC All-Conference performer Kelli Nies who graduated last spring. Odden was the MVP of West Fargo last season and was a member of high school team that won three state championships. Laura Johnson is a two-year starter at first base who led the team in doubles (8) last season and was second in walks (10).

The outfield will be a different story for Stacey Holm's crew. While the infield has three solid returning starters, the outfield will be a brand new group that will have to continue to grow throughout the season. Sophomore Emily Jensen (Benson, Minn.) is the lone returning starter from a year ago. Jensen started in 28 games in center field in 2007 and led the team in home runs as a freshman. She was also third in total bases. The other two outfield spots will have a mixture of players competing for the two spots. A pair of sophomores appear to be the leading candidates heading into the year. Zimmerman and Kylene Compton (Worden, Mont./Huntley Project HS) both have experience from last year. Zimmerman has shown some pop in her bat and has a chance to improve at the plate given regular playing time.

Another area of concern for Holm will be behind the plate where the team will have to replace four-year starter Shantelle Nogowski who was lost to graduation. Look for one of the eight freshmen on this year's team to inherit the job. If no one can step into the role as the team's backstop then Michaelson could be pressed into catching duties. If Michaelson heads behind the plate then sophomore Maddie Haroldson (Sartell, Minn.) will get the call at third base. Haroldson should be the team's full-time DH this year. Last season she had one home run and two doubles in limited playing time. She has extra base power and had a slugging percentage of .321 last season.

If Holm can piece together all the different parts of another young puzzle then the Cobbers could be in the hunt for one of the four MIAC playoff spots come May.

Gustavus

Coach: Jeff Annis (3rd season)

2007 Finish: 2nd (20-2 MIAC, 32-10 overall)

Gustavus Athletes to Watch

Rachael Click (Jr., IF, Rochester, Minn.)
Emily Klein (Jr., OF, Red Wing, Minn.)
Julie Mahre (Sr., IF, Lino Lakes, Minn.)

Gustavus Season Preview
<p>The 2008 Gustavus Adolphus softball team looks to once again compete for the conference title after finishing second in the league with a 20-2 record last season. Head coach Jeff Annis’ squad brings a blend of experience and youth to the field as the Gusties look to make their second consecutive appearance in the NCAA Tournament after compiling a program-best 32-10 overall record in 2007.</p> <p>The Golden Gusties return the middle of their defense as all-region players Julie Mahre, Rachael Click, and Emily Klein are back for another season. Mahre, a three-time All-MIAC selection at second base, led the team in batting average (.442), hits (53) and home runs (11) last season as she finished in the top five of seven league offensive statistical categories. Mahre will be joined in the heart of the infield by shortstop Rachael Click, who was named to the All-MIAC Team for the second time last season after leading the conference in batting average, slugging percentage, hits, and RBI. Gustavus center fielder Emily Klein will anchor an outfield defense where she committed only one error in 2007 and provides speed on the base paths where she tied the single stolen base record of 23.</p> <p>Annis has recruited a talented group of pitchers and catchers to help replace the all-conference battery of Joyce DeWitz and Abby Bernstein. DeWitz, a three-time All-MIAC performer, finished her career with nearly every Gustie career pitching record including appearances, starts, innings pitched, wins, and strikeouts. Bernstein was solid behind the plate in every game last season as she hit .360 and committed only one error in 235 opportunities. However, Annis remains confident in the development of a youthful pitching core that includes sophomores Betsie Collins and Callie Nelsen, and first-year Erin Truebenbach, a First Team All-State pitcher. Coach Annis will rotate these pitchers until someone emerges from the group. Several players will battle for time behind the plate including sophomore Brianne Ruedy, the only catcher with collegiate experience, and first-year players Dani Catrysse, Chelsie Hansen, and Kelly Myers. Gustavus’ success will depend on how quickly the younger players can adjust to the collegiate level as the season progresses.</p> <p>The Gusties will be tested early in the season with a doubleheader against sixth-ranked UW-Eau Claire indoors before traveling to Tucson, Ariz. to participate in the Tucson Invitational against Hope International, University of Chicago, Lawrence University, Luther and Kalamazoo. The team will face highly ranked St. Thomas on April 1 just after they return from Arizona.</p>

Hamline

Coach: Jim Rubbelke (1st season)
2007 Finish: 4th (13-8-1 MIAC, 21-17-1 overall)

Hamline Athletes to Watch
N/A

Hamline Season Preview
N/A

Macalester

Coach: Tom Cross (5th season)
2007 Finish: Tied 9th (6-16 MIAC, 10-28 overall)

Macalester Athletes to Watch

Katie Grudnowski (Sr., IF/OF, Minnetonka, Minn./Blake School)

Olivia Abbott (So., P, Lakewood, Colo./Green Mountain)

Crystal Barriga (So., C, Broomfield, Colo./Legacy)

Macalester Season Preview

Macalester fielded a lineup made up mostly of frosh last year and this year's sophomore-led team is looking to continue to lead the program in a new direction. The '07 Mac squad scored more runs than the previous two seasons combined and reached double digits in the win column with 10. On many occasions last season, eight of the nine players on the field were first-years as the program took a big step in building for a successful future.

The young Scots do have a veteran presence in All-MIAC leadoff batter Katie Grudnowski (Sr., Minnetonka, Minn. / Blake School). Grudnowski has been an infielder most of her Mac career but may concentrate on center field this year. Last year she hit .360 with a lofty .440 on-base percentage, and also led the team in runs, total bases and steals.

The pitcher / catcher battery of honorable mention All-MIAC picks Olivia Abbott (So., Lakewood, Colo. / Green Mountain) and Crystal Barriga (So., Broomfield, Colo. / Legacy) were a pair of the league's top newcomers a year ago. In the circle, Abbott was 8-14 with a 4.27 ERA and 78 strikeouts, and was an MIAC pitcher of the week selection. Behind the plate, Barriga led the team with 19 rungs batted in and batted .302 on the season. Ali Nystrom (So., Minnetonka, Minn.) joins Abbott in the circle and will also play in the infield.

Monica Keaney (So., Philadelphia, Pa. / Friends Select) hit .315 from her shortstop positions and is another key returner to the lineup. Joining Keaney and Nystrom in the Mac infield are Alison Phillips (So., Vernon Hills, Ill. / Adlai E. Stevenson), Carley Klingensmith (So., New York, N.Y. / Nightingale-Bamford School), Meredith Wisniewski (Jr. Park Ridge, Ill. / Maine South).

Grudnowski and Amanda Cagan (So., Saratoga, Calif. / Monta Vista) lead the Macalester outfielders. Newcomers expected to play big roles on this team right off the bat are infielder Hayley Reeves (Fy., Oberlin, Ohio) and catcher/infielder Lisa Moldan (Fy., Sleepy Eye, Minn. / St. Mary's).

Macalester will play its home games again this year at Dunning Field near Concordia University and St. Paul Central High School as the college's new softball facility is completed this spring.

Saint Benedict

Coach: Denny Johnson (22nd season)

2007 Finish: 5th (13-9 MIAC, 18-16 overall)

Saint Benedict Athletes to Watch

Nicki Holmes (Sr., INF, Eagan, Minn.)

Beth Hanson (So., OF/INF, Faribault, Minn.)

Shannon Eveland (So., INF, Maple Grove, Minn.)

Andrea Fahey (Jr., P, Little Canada, Minn.)

Molly Bodeker (Jr., C, Eagan, Minn.)

Jillian Rigg (Jr., OF, Billings, Mont.)

Saint Benedict Season Preview

The 2008 Blazer softball team is coming off a year in which the team finished 18-16 overall and 13-9 in the MIAC. Saint Benedict graduated five senior starters from last season's team and will be seeking contributions from fresh faces in 2008.

Nicki Holmes, the sole senior on the team, will be Blazers' leader in the infield this spring taking over duties at second base. Joining Holmes in the middle infield will be sophomore shortstop Shannon Eveland. Eveland started all 34 games at shortstop as a first-year in 2007 and led the team in RBI's with 17.

The Blazer outfield crew will be led by junior Jillian Rigg, who batted .274 and had five outfield assists last season while playing left field.

The biggest unknown coming into spring will be the pitching staff. The Blazers lost All-MIAC pitchers Monica Eiden and Christina Gardner from last season's roster. Saint Benedict will look to junior Andrea Fahey to step up and take a spot in the Blazer rotation. First-years Laura Althoff and Elle Borba will also see time on the mound this spring.

Saint Benedict begins its season playing 12 games at the Spring Rebel Games Mar. 16-22 in Orlando, Fla.

St. Catherine

Coach: Madge Makowske (13th season)

2007 Finish: 6th (10-11-1 MIAC, 14-23-1 overall)

St. Catherine Athletes to Watch

Kayla Webster (So., Billings, Mont.)

Jessi McGehee (Jr., Oakdale, Minn.)

St. Catherine Season Preview

The 2008 version of the Wildcat softball team enters the season looking to build on a 2007 season that saw them finish sixth in the MIAC with a record of 10-11-1. The Wildcats will have to replace Jess Lewandowski who was a two-time All-Conference performer and finished her senior season with a .370 batting average and a 10-6 record as a pitcher.

Head coach Madge Makowske will look to Kayla Webster, (So., Billings, Mont.) to pick up some of the offensive punch. Webster was one of just four first-year players to be named All-Conference in 2007. She finished her first season as a Wildcat with a .347 batting average and five home runs. In addition to Webster, Makowske will look to catcher Jessi McGehee (Jr., Oakdale, Minn.) to be a leader for this young Wildcat team. McGehee was an honorable mention All-Conference selection last season and finished with a .362 batting average and also started 33 games behind the plate for the Wildcats.

The Wildcats have only one senior on this season's roster but have seven first-year players who will be looked at to make significant contributions to a Wildcat team that finished sixth in the MIAC in 2007 with a .273 batting average.

"I think that we have a nice mix of experienced players to go along with several very talented first-years," stated Makowske. "It will be tough to replace Jess but we have some players who are ready to make the jump to help lead this team," added Makowske.

Saint Mary's

Coach: Jen Miller (2nd season)

2007 Finish: 3rd (17-5 MIAC, 24-15 overall)

Saint Mary's Athletes to Watch

Cassie Otte (Jr., OF, Randolph, Minn.)

Danielle Geske (Jr., OF, Rosemount, Minn.)

Jenny Giannini (Sr., INF, River Grove, Ill.)

Saint Mary's Season Preview

The 2007 MIAC Tournament didn't end quite the way Saint Mary's University fastpitch softball coach Jen Miller had hoped, as the Cardinals were eliminated by St. Thomas, 8-4 in the tournament's title game.

"It was a tough way to lose, but it's hard to feel too disappointed," admitted Miller, who closed out her first season as the Cardinals' head coach with a 24-15 overall record — marking the 14th straight season in which SMU has won at least 20 games.

"I was proud of what we accomplished last year — and there's no question we're going to miss our five seniors," added Miller, who will begin her second season at the helm without the luxury of penciling Nikki Jung, Megan Wallisch, Melissa Mondo, Tara Close and Megan Schaar in the line-up card. "We've got a lot of big shoes to fill, but we also have a very good veteran group — and a number of talented freshmen — so I think we'll be OK.

"But we're certainly going to have a new look (in 2008)."

A new look, and, Miller hopes, armed for another run at the MIAC's regular and tournament championships.

Now that would be good news.

St. Olaf

Coach: Ruthie Neuger (4th season)

2007 Finish: Tied 7th (8-14 MIAC, 10-23 overall)

St. Olaf Athletes to Watch

Emily Hennig (Sr., C/IF)

Ali Berens (So., IF)

St. Olaf Season Preview

The St. Olaf softball team will have a few key tools to build around in hopes of moving north in the Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference standings.

Fourth year head coach Ruthie Neuger has seen her teams make a one-spot jump each year. The Oles were tenth in her first year, ninth in 2006 and eighth in 2007.

Neuger has a pair of offensive threats that will solidify her 2007 lineup card – Ali Berens and Emily Hennig.

Berens, a sophomore, led the team in almost every offensive category in her rookie season – average (.351), hits (40) and total bases (61). She was the Oles' only pick on the MIAC's all-conference team and one of just three first years selected. Berens played first base for most of 2007, but she will move over to third this spring.

Hennig, who like Berens was All-MIAC as a first year, has been a mainstay in the team's lineup since her arrival in 2005. She has played in every game in her career and has started all but two. She was an all-conference honorable mention selection in 2007. Her four homers, three triples and 23 RBI led the team. Hennig played behind the dish last spring and will again for her final campaign.

Senior Katie Rodd will move from second base to short this year. Rodd has 86 games under her belt and has hit as high as .255, as she did as a sophomore.

On the right side of the infield, St. Olaf will likely turn to first year Melanie Brooks at first base and sophomore Ellen Larson at second. Larson saw limited action last year, hitting .261 in 14 appearances.

Senior captain Katie Dobie will patrol left field after her first year as a starter in 2007.

Center field will be, at least to start, first year Kjirsten Speer's spot. Speer was a two-time team MVP at Flintridge Preparatory School in Glendale, Calif.

Right field will be up in the air. Janae Fabini, a senior who played mostly on the infield over the past two seasons, could be the frontrunner. Fabini hit .211 last season and .213 in 2006.

The Oles will use a pair of first years – Katie Truax and Natalee McNeff – with their veterans to try to find a successful pitching rotation.

Truax was a four-time letterwinner and three-time all-conference selection at Waukesha West High School in Waukesha, Wis. McNeff earned three letters and an all-conference nod from Great Oak High School in Temecula, Calif.

Last season, Erin Johnson and Jenny Beiersdorf each collected 18 appearances. Beiersdorf had a team-high 14 starts and team-best 5.33 ERA, but both had three wins to their credit.

St. Olaf opens its 2008 schedule against Luther College at the Rosemount Dome on March 10. After a ten-game stint over spring break in Fort Myers, Fla., the Oles open their conference schedule at Saint Mary's University on April 1.

St. Thomas

Coach: John Tschida (8th season)

2007 Finish: 1st (22-0 MIAC, 42-4 overall)

St. Thomas Athletes to Watch

Missy Bruggeman (Jr., OF/INF, Greenbush, Minn./Middle River)

Maria Bye (Sr., RHP/Util, Maple Plain, Minn./Orono)

Steph Moores (Jr., C, Big Lake, Minn.)

Colleen Owen (Jr., OF, Lakeville, Minn.)

Kaitlin Wightman (Jr., SS/2B, Forest Lake, Minn.)

Alison Wright (So., OF, Pewaukee, Wis.)

St. Thomas Season Preview

The 2008 St. Thomas softball team received the No. 4 preseason ranking in the NFCA Division III poll. Defending champion Linfield (Ore), Wartburg and Plattsburgh (N.Y.) State rank 1-2-3 with the Tommies and Louisiana College at No. 4.

The Tommies will play at least seven games in March against Division III and NAIA ranked teams. They open MIAC play April 1 at home vs. prime MIAC challenger Gustavus.

Coach John Tschida graduated two-time All-American Carrie Embree from a 42-4 team of last season. The Tommies return two-time All-American pitcher-1B Maria Bye, the MIAC Pitcher and Player of the Year in 2007. On her career, Bye is 63-8 with an 0.97 ERA and 577 strikeouts in 409 innings as a pitcher. In Bye's three-year era thus far, St. Thomas is 133-14, including a 73-2 mark vs. conference foes. Her 25 home runs ranks third all-time in MIAC history.

Tschida is the winningest coach in NCAA Division III softball with a 13-year head coaching mark of 491-87 (.849). He's starting his eighth season at St. Thomas (284-42 overall, 159-7 MIAC here), where he's won six conference titles and twice has been named National Coach of the Year. In his last 11 seasons at St. Mary's and St. Thomas, Tschida's teams are 244-12 vs. conference foes and have swept 111 of 121 doubleheaders, splitting nine while being swept just once (plus a 12-0 record in MIAC playoffs).

Other returners include senior infielder Anne Carpentier (.391 in her last 21 games last season); junior OF Missy Bruggeman (Career: 97 games, 72 hits, 55 runs); junior SS Morgan Betker (honorable mention All-MIAC honoree, .358 with 30 RBI, 30 runs, 38 hits, five HRs, eight doubles, seven walks and nine steals); junior 2B Kaity Wightman (43 games, .382, 47 hits, 40 runs, 24 RBI, four HRs, eight doubles, one triple, 12 walks, 22 steals and only two errors in 87 infield chances); junior catcher Steph Moores (2007: .405, 45 hits); junior OF Colleen Owen (Career: 38 hits, 27 runs, 21 RBI in 74 games); sophomore OF Alison Wright (MIAC Rookie of the Year, All-MIAC, hit .402, 53 hits, 25 runs, 33 RBI, 11 doubles, four HRs, two triples, 12 steals and three walks); and sophomore RHP Marta Radcliffe (2007: 1-0, 9 app., ERA).

Senior transfer Olivia Graham will play third base. She started all 58 games at Division II St. Cloud State last season and hit .299 with 52 hits and only six errors.