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From humble beginnings, the Buffalo softball program has emerged as a regular state power in Class AAAA with three straight appearances. This could be the year the Bison finish the deal with a state championship.

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After earning their first-ever state tournament berth last spring, the Prowlers and coach Carter Rogalla are primed to repeat, anchored by the battery of ace pitcher Alex Rogalla and catcher Josie Davis.

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CAMP DIRECTORY 100

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BREAKDOWN SPORTS MEDIA

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Moorhead, MN 56560
Phone: 763-258-3116
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Printing: Walters' Publishing, Mankato, MN
Copyright 2018

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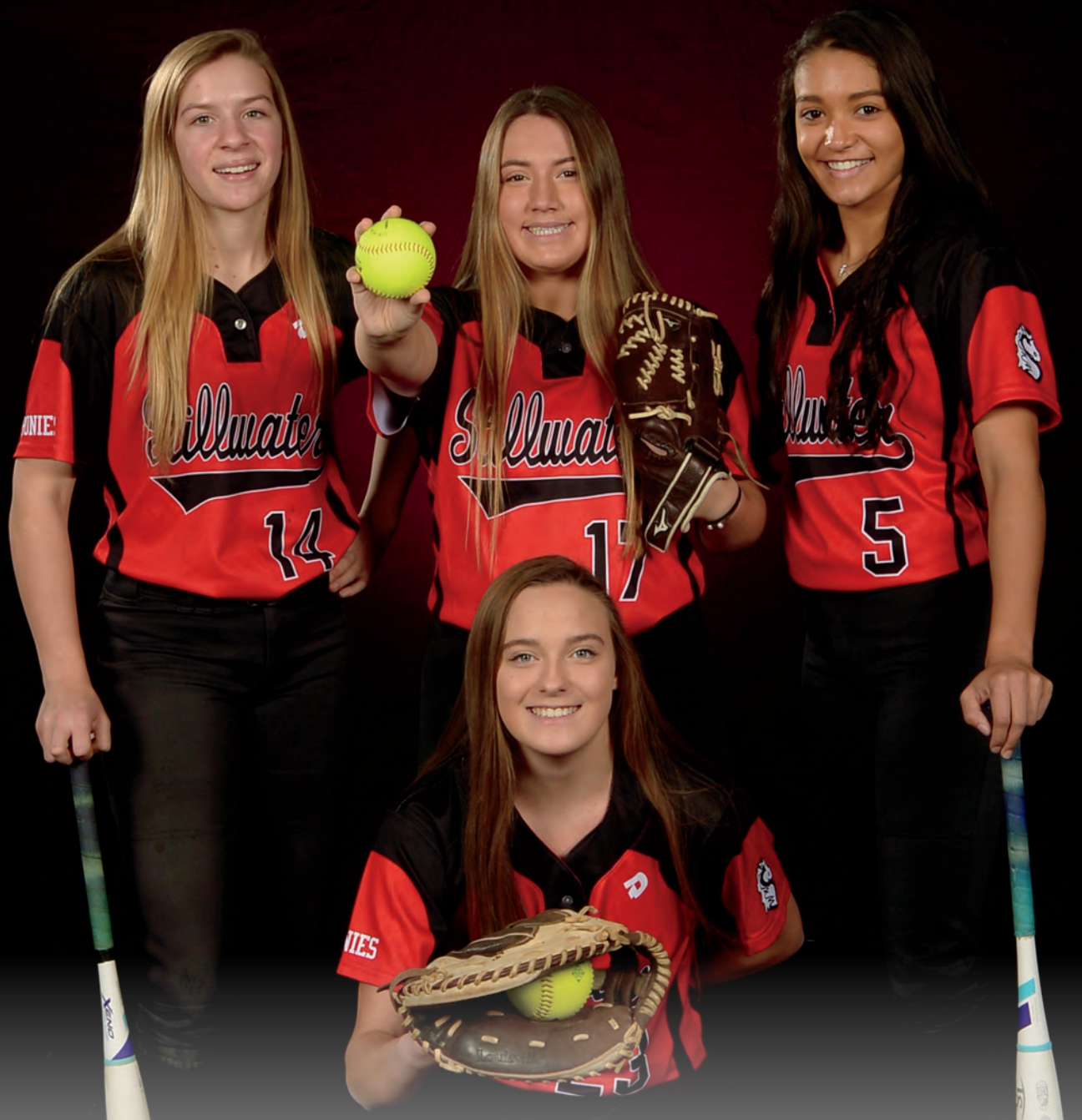
FROM THE EDITOR

The **BREAKDOWN** staff would like to wish everyone good luck in the upcoming season as we look forward to another year of providing statewide coverage. Make sure you stay informed at www.BreakdownSportsUSA.com throughout the season.

The **BREAKDOWN** publications are Minnesota's No. 1 resource for players, coaches, fans and sports enthusiasts. The **BREAKDOWN** is a full-service Minnesota high school sports company, offering season preview publications, in-season and youth tournaments, off-season leagues, newsletters, photography and an extensive website. We've been covering boys' and girls' basketball since 2001, boys' hockey and girls' volleyball since 2008, boys' baseball since 2014, and girls' softball and girls' hockey since 2018.

In short, The **BREAKDOWN** is the "Minnesota high school sports encyclopedia."

Note: All of the information provided in the Breakdown's annual guidebook to high school sports is believed to be accurate as of our submission date of March 1, 2018, but is not guaranteed.



THE CRYSTAL BALL PREDICTIONS

KEY VOLLEYBALL EXPERTS TAKE THEIR BEST GUESSES AS TO WHAT
WILL HAPPEN IN THE 2018 MINNESOTA HIGH SCHOOL SOFTBALL SEASON
— FROM CHAMPIONS TO SURPRISES AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN

Tim Kolehmainen / Breakdown.zenfolio.com

1. Who will win the Class AAAA title this year and why?

► **Buffalo.** The Bison have advanced to three straight state tournaments under coach Brad Zrust and have arguably their best team returning this spring. Shortstop Emily Hansen is one of the favorites for Miss Softball and may be the best pure hitter in the state, while the battery of Morgan DeMarais and Katie Carlson highlights the experienced veteran leadership on the team. Three Bison are headed to D1 programs after this spring (Hansen to the University of Minnesota, DeMarais to South Dakota State, and Sarah Hudson to Villanova) and would love to go out with a state title.

— TIM KOLEHMAINEN

► **Prior Lake.** The Lakers were the No. 3-ranked team in Class 4A at the end of the 2017 regular season but couldn't get past Chanhassen in the Section 2 playoffs. The roster is deep, led by the metro's top returning battery, pitcher Kailey Ahlstrom and catcher Abby Sagert.

— JIM PAULSEN

2. Who will win the Class AAA title this year and why?

► **Winona.** Don't count out the Winhawks. Even though coach Scott Halverson lost three first-team All-State studs to graduation, the cupboard is far from bare at Winona. Junior Annika Anderson has patiently waited for her time behind Miss Softball finalist Ashton Hoepfner and is ready to take the ball every game. In 72.2 innings of varsity pitching behind Hoepfner, Anderson has struck out 101 hitters and never lost (9-0 in nine decisions). Lauryn Hamernik and juniors Savannah and Samantha Iverson will anchor the lineup.

— TIM KOLEHMAINEN

► **Mankato West.** The Scarlets lost a few key seniors to graduation, but there's always talent in the pipeline. Seniors Briggs Carlson, P, and Emily Veroeven, 2B, are nice pieces to build around.

— JIM PAULSEN

3. Who will win the Class AA title this year and why?

► **Maple Lake.** The Irish lost just one game last year, but it came in the state final against Zumbrota-Mazeppa. Expect that loss to fuel Maple Lake this spring — that and the return of nearly its entire lineup from a year ago. It starts on the mound with senior Calli Maki, a first-team All-State selection along with teammate Amber Klug. Maki and Klug were two of five returning Irish (including Mollie Scheiber, Linsey Rachel, and Katie Goetz) who hit better than .400 last year, and six who hit at least four homers (including Olivia Paumen). This is a team built to win and win and win.

— TIM KOLEHMAINEN

► **Maple Lake.** The Irish were undefeated in 2017 until falling to Zumbrota-Mazeppa in the state championship game. There's a lot of talent back with unfinished business to tend to.

— JIM PAULSEN

4. Who will win the Class A title this year and why?

► **New York Mills.** Speaking of teams with plenty of talent returning, the Eagles literally return everyone from last year's state championship team. Yes, all 11 letter winners return, anchored by ace pitcher Rhiana Roberts, who hit over .500 and struck out 130 in 114 innings in the circle. Seven different Eagles hit at least .400 and two (Roberts and junior Sierra Gerber) hit at least .500. Along with Roberts, senior Kaitlyn Kane and junior Kenna Salo were also named All-State. No other Class A program can match that returning depth of talent.

— TIM KOLEHMAINEN

► **New York Mills.** Pitching might be the name of the game but the defending state champion Eagles made their mark with their bats, averaging 11.4 runs per game in 2017. And everyone is back.

— JIM PAULSEN

5. Who is your favorite sleeper team?

► **Carlton.** Is it too early to get on the Bulldogs' bandwagon? Absolutely not. Carlton advanced to the state tournament last year with a lineup full of freshmen, including Abby and Brynne Mickle, Alaina Bennett, and Taylor Nelson, all of whom earned All-Polar League recognition. Still just sophomores, they're ready to bring Carlton back to state — and this time return with at least one victory, if not more. With three more years of varsity ball for that quartet, expect to see Carlton to be a regular in North Mankato in June.

— TIM KOLEHMAINEN

► **Buffalo.** The Bison have the best pure hitter in the state in Emily Hansen and a veteran on the rubber in senior Morgan DeMarais.

— JIM PAULSEN

6. Who will win Miss Softball and why?

► **Abby Lien, Eastview.** A true threat anywhere on the diamond, Lien is a key figure in Eastview's state tournament hopes this spring. In 75 at-bats last spring, Lien struck out just once against 13 walks, while hitting 10 doubles and six homers. She has great bat speed and patience, a lethal combination for opposing pitchers. She's already committed to the University of Iowa.

— TIM KOLEHMAINEN

► **Emily Hansen, Buffalo.** The U of M-signeer has pop in her bat and a terrific eye. At one point in 2017, she had a 19-for-19 streak at the plate.

— JIM PAULSEN

7. Your best go-out-on-a-limb prediction is...

► **None of last year's state champions will repeat this spring.** Normally that wouldn't be going out on a limb, except that most of the four (Farmington in Class AAAA, Winona in Class AAA,

Zumbrota-Mazeppa in Class AA, and New York Mills in Class A) have enough talent to again be considered contenders — if not enough talent to be considered the favorite in at least one case.

— TIM KOLEHMAINEN

► **Balls will be flying out of parks this spring.** Power hitters like Hansen, Farmington's Emma Frost, Tartan's Marissa Hawkins and Blaine's Mary Pardo will battle for the home run lead.

— JIM PAULSEN



Eastview's Abby Lien

OUR PANEL

Tim Kolehmainen is the editor and vice president of Breakdown Sports Media, which covers high school baseball, hockey, basketball, volleyball, and softball since 2001. He was also an award-winning sports editor at a Minnesota weekly newspaper and beat writer at a daily in Connecticut. Email him at tim@breakdownsportsusa.com

Jim Paulsen has been a fixture in prep sports at the Star Tribune since cell phones were considered a newfangled technology and probably just a fad. He covers a variety of sports, with particular interests in football, volleyball and softball. He can be reached at james.paulsen@startribune.com or followed (but not stalked) on Twitter at @JimPaulsen

2018 WATCH LIST

MISS SOFTBALL



RHIANA ROBERTS
P/SS, New York Mills



MARY PARDO
2B/CF, Blaine



EMILY HANSEN
SS, Buffalo



MEGAN BANIECKE
P/1B, Forest Lake



AMBER KLUG
C/1B, Maple Lake



ABBY LIEN
SS, Eastview



SARAH JOHNSON
P, Annandale



MADDIE SCHWARTZ
P, Chanhassen



NATALIE DENHARTOG
SS, Hopkins



KAILEY AHLSTROM
P, Prior Lake



JODY HANSEN
SS, Sleepy Eye St. Mary's



BRIGGS CARLSON
P, Mankato West

MISS SOFTBALL

2010 Sara MoultonEagan
2011 Kelsey AndersonBurnsville
2012 Nikki AndersonBrainerd
2013 Samantha HartmannOrono
2014 Erika RozellLakeville North
2015 Maddie DamonKasson-Mantorville
2016 Katelyn KemmetmuellerRogers
2017 Amber ElliottAnoka

► **AMBER ELLIOTT**, Anoka. Elliott led the Tornadoes to second place in the Class AAAA state tournament, falling in a 1-0 extra inning game to Farmington. She struck out 17 Tigers in that game and finished her high school career with a 0.93 ERA and more than 500 strikeouts. The Augustana commit racked up a 10-2 record with 145 strikeouts and 0.61 ERA as a senior, adding a .466 batting average and 19 runs at the plate.



Tim Kolehrmainen / Breakdown.zenfolio.com

THE BREAKDOWN'S TOP PLAYERS

Sr

SUPER 100 SENIORS

Emma Adamek..... Jordan
Kailey Ahlstrom..... Prior Lake
Adrianna Baab..... Wabasha-Kellogg
Megan Baniecke..... Forest Lake
Ali Beltz..... Sleepy Eye St. Mary's
Emily Benz..... Wabasso
Chynna Berning..... Edgerton/SWMC
Shelby Bloemendaal..... Pipestone Area
Brittney Boser..... Pierz
Sawyer Brewster..... Burnsville
Courtney Buerman..... Albany
Emily Bukkila..... Brandon-Evansville
Briggs Carlson..... Mankato West
Katie Carlson..... Buffalo
Sophie Cave..... North St. Paul
Mya Chmielewski..... Mayer Lutheran
Allison Christians..... Waconia
Elaina Christiansen..... Brainerd
Morgan DeMarais..... Buffalo
Natalie DenHartog..... Hopkins
Amanda Dickmeyer..... Woodbury
Jasmin Estrada..... Litchfield
Emma Frost..... Farmington
Abbey Gapinski..... Rochester Lourdes
Kali Giesler..... Osakis
Grace Gilmore..... Centennial
Tess Glenzinski..... Bethlehem Academy
Elizabeth Hackbarth..... Spectrum
Allissa Hallaway..... Triton
Emily Hansen..... Buffalo
Jody Hansen..... Sleepy Eye St. Mary's
Courtney Hanson..... New London-Spicer
Mallory Helget..... Sleepy Eye St. Mary's
Brooke Herman..... Southwest Christian
Kyal Heydt..... Hayfield
Davriana Horvath..... Esko
Sarah Hudson..... Buffalo
Brooke Humphreys..... Roseville Area
Sarah Johnson..... Annandale
Kaitlyn Kane..... New York Mills
Maddie Kaste..... Mahtomedi
Kennedy Kehr..... Coon Rapids
Jocelyn Kirk..... Prior Lake
Amber Klug..... Maple Lake
Kate Kruger..... Hayfield
Sydney Lanoue..... Tracy-Milroy-Balaton
Mackenzie Leither..... Kimball Area
Abby Lien..... Eastview
Calli Maki..... Maple Lake
Olivia McCabe..... St. Peter
McKenna Melville..... Eagan
Katie Merchant..... Kimball Area
Karina Monson..... Eagan
Taylor Mullen..... Belle Plaine
Bridget Murphy..... Providence Academy
Jillian Noel..... Northfield
Megan Osterhaus..... Burnsville
Maria Pake..... D-G-F
Mary Pardo..... Blaine
Lauren Pederson..... ML-WR
Samantha Pederson..... North Branch
Riley Perryman..... Park of Cottage Grove

Lea Peterson..... Barnum
Eleanor Plager..... Rochester Lourdes
Lydia Plechaty..... Jordan
Linsey Rachel..... Maple Lake
Calley Richardson..... Alexandria Area
Rhiana Roberts..... New York Mills
Lexi Roby..... Brainerd
Kaitlyn Rocco..... Woodbury
Carrie Rutledge..... Hayfield
Abby Sagert..... Prior Lake
Martina Saulsbury..... Mayer Lutheran
Mollie Scheiber..... Maple Lake
Ellie Schwartz..... Becker
Maddie Schwartz..... Chanhassen
Alayna Silvis..... Park of Cottage Grove
Danielle Sorenson..... Rosemount
Katie Spaulding..... Kimball Area
Carly St. George..... Mounds View
Morgan Stearns..... Sibley East
Maggie Streightiff..... Hayfield
Cassie Swanson..... Faribault
Jordyn Swoboda..... Willmar
Hailie Tegmeier..... Wtrvle-Elysian-Morristwn
Riley Thalhuber..... Holy Angels
Margurite Thiele..... North Lakes Academy
Emily Veroveen..... Mankato West
Grace Viland..... Bethlehem Academy
Laechen Wagner..... Kelliher/Northome
McKenzie Whalen..... East Grand Forks
Courtney Williams..... Fairmont
Taylor Williams..... Rush City
Rylie Wilner..... Atwater-Cosmos-Grove City
Emilee Wilson..... Esko
Jayna Witzany..... Hill-Murray
Maleah Wohletz..... Albany
Lauren York..... Delano
Delaney Young..... Park of Cottage Grove
Kaitlyn Zenner..... Visitation



Sleepy Eye St. Mary's Jody Hansen

Jr

TOP 75 JUNIORS

Annika Anderson..... Winona
McKayla Armbruster..... Faribault
Claire Bakkestuen..... Forest Lake
Annalise Bell..... Stillwater Area
Mercedes Bellanger..... Detroit Lakes
Isabelle Berg..... Chatfield
Kelsey Berndt..... LeSueur-Henderson
Maggie Biermaier..... Rush City
Holly Blaska..... Champlin Park
Abby Bollingberg..... Lyle/Austin Pacelli
Carli Botten..... New Ulm
Kaylyn Bowen..... Rush City
Mackenzie Brey..... St. Peter
Kennedy Burquest..... Maranatha Christian
Torri Chute..... Stillwater Area
Jaiden Conroy..... Ortonville
Liz Dietz..... Morris Area/Chokio-Alberta
Ava Dueck..... Maple Grove
Hailey Fletcher..... North Lakes Academy
Lauryn Franta..... New Ulm Cathedral
Maria Gutzmann..... St. Agnes
Nicole Hall..... Nicollet
Allison Hanson..... Lake City
Erin Hawk..... Proctor
Olivia Hazelbaker..... Farmington
Caitlin Heinen..... Rocori
Maurissa Isaacs..... Windom Area
Kaitlyn Istvanovich..... Chisago Lakes
Samantha Johnson..... New London-Spicer
Aliya Johnston..... PACT Charter
Jaden Klimek..... Osakis
Mia Kraimer..... New Prague
Jordan Lang..... Lakeville South
Sydney Larson..... Minneota/Canby
Shannon Leahy..... Hill-Murray
Emma Liebsch..... Long Prairie-Grey Eagle
Kaija Ludewig..... St. Cloud Apollo
Lauryn Manning..... Detroit Lakes

Un

ELITE 35 UNDERCLASSMEN

Kylea Baartman..... Russell-Tyler-Ruthton
Kiana Bender..... Cloquet
Gabby Buckridge..... Edgerton/SW MN Christian
Emilee Buringa..... St. Charles
Bryn Carlstrom..... Rochester Mayo
Alexis Chase..... Chatfield
McKenna Daniels..... Chatfield
CJ Decker..... Howard Lake-Waverly-Winsted
Josie Donaldson..... St. Anthony Village
Angel Dye..... Eastview
Haley Eder-Zdechlik..... Stillwater Area
Megan Erickson..... Randolph
Katie Goelz..... Maple Lake
Tori Harren..... Kimball Area
Hailey Heckenlaible..... St. Francis
Trista Hering..... Waterville-Elysian-Morristown
Miah Hermanson..... Andover
Carlie Hildebrandt..... Stewartville

Caitlin Hinz..... Monticello
Sarah Houlihan..... Benilde-St. Margaret's
Sydney Johnson..... Apple Valley
Ellie Maricle..... Windom Area
Abby Mickel..... Carlton
Brynne Mickel..... Carlton
Katelyn Nordmeyer..... New London-Spicer
Ryah Opsahl..... NCE/U-H
Mackenna Otte..... Randolph
Morgyn Otte..... Randolph
Genevieve Ovsak..... Edina
Evy Polsfuss..... Eastview
Kate Pryor..... Minnehaha Academy
Amy Quast..... Wayzata
Breeana Todd..... Dover-Eyota
Tori Tollefson..... Chanhassen
Corrie Weise..... Becker



Hermantown's Hannah Mihalik

SECTION PREVIEW

5AAAA

PREDICTION

1. Maple Grove (No. 7)
2. Champlin Park (No. 13)
3. Centennial
4. Rogers
5. Spring Lake Park

DETAILS

► SECTION CHANGES:

Arrivals: Rogers (from 8AAAA).
Departures: Mounds View (to 4AAAA).

► PAST SECTION CHAMPIONS:

2016 — Spring Lake Park
2017 — Maple Grove

With its sixth state tournament appearance in eight years, Maple Grove has proven to be one of the most consistent programs in all of Class AAAA. Despite graduation losses that would hit most other programs hard, the Crimson should again be among not only the top teams in Section 5AAAA, but in all of Class AAAA.

Maple Grove: It starts in the circle, where junior Ava Dueck looks to build on an all-conference sophomore campaign in which she won 11 games with a sparring 1.68 ERA. She also hit .421 with a team-best five homers and 27 RBI, so she's an around-the-diamond threat. But she was just one of three returning all-conference Crimson who hit at least .400, along with senior Marie Pallansch and junior Jade Tomashek. The Crimson should use last year's state tournament experience to the favorite's role in the section.

Champlin Park: Rebels' junior Holly Blaska might just be the best hitter in the section, as she slugged five

homers and 27 RBI with a .508 batting average as a sophomore. She's committed to Miami of Ohio and will anchor the Rebels' lineup.

Centennial: Seven of the eight schools in the section belong to the Northwest Suburban Conference, including the Cougars, who finished just one game behind Rogers and Maple Grove with an 8-5 record. The Cougars will again be a factor with senior Grace Gilmore and crew.

Other contenders: Rogers must adjust to life without Mississippi 8 Conference offensive MVP Melea Bruns, while **Spring Lake Park** returns some young talent that has had a good offseason, such as sophomore catcher MaKenzee Stone. **Osseo** graduated a big senior class that helped the Orioles to 10 wins a year ago, while **Irondale** and **Park Center** look to make a jump from tough seasons. The Knights return their top pitcher and several key bats, so they should be improved.

—Tim Kolehmainen

ALL-SECTION



Holly Blaska,
Champlin Park



Jade Tomashek,
Maple Grove



Krysta Felber,
Rogers



Ava Dueck, Maple
Grove



Piper Otto,
Champlin Park



MaKenzee Stone,
Spring Lake Park



Marie Pallansch,
Maple Grove



Grace Gilmore,
Centennial



Annalise
Scamehorn,
Irondale

Photos by Tim Kolehmainen / Breakdown.zenfolio.com

CENTENNIAL

NICKNAME: Cougars
CONFERENCE: Northwest Suburban
SECTION: 5AAAA
CONFERENCE RECORD: 8-5
OVERALL RECORD: 11-12
STATE TRIPS: none
COACH: Amanda Daeger

► **GRADUATION LOSSES:** P Vanessa Brown; P Elizabeth Grone; P Jennifer Hicks; P Amanda Mathies; P Raelyn Nyren; P Katie Woznak

RETURNING ROSTER						
Name	Gr	Pos	Ht	Bats	Thrs	
Julia Azure	11	P				
Olivia Beaulieu	12	P				
Anna DeBlizan	11	P				
Madeline Fidler	11	P				
Grace Gilmore	12	P				
Reily Haney	12	P				
Hannah Hudson	12	P				
Coryn Jacobson	11	P				
Mackenzie Lohse	11	P				
Anna Lundeen	11	P				
Alyssa Montero	11	P				
Madilyn Newman	11	P				
Rylie Perkins	11	P				
Elissa Rooney	12	P				
Katelyn Schabacker	11	P				
Hailey Thom	12	P				
Olivia Trettel	10	P				

► GRACE GILMORE, Sr. P

- **BREAKDOWN SUPER 100 SENIORS**
- **ALL-NWSC**
- **COLLEGE:** St. Benedict's



► ALYSSA MONTERO, Jr. P

- **ALL-NWSC**

► MADILYN NEWMAN, Jr. P

- **ALL-NWSC**

CHAMPLIN PARK

13

NICKNAME: Rebels
CONFERENCE: Northwest Suburban
SECTION: 5AAAA
CONFERENCE RECORD: 6-7
OVERALL RECORD: 13-11
STATE TRIPS: none
COACH: Bryan Woodley
YEARS COACHING/RECORD: 12/127-117

COACH'S COMMENTS: We graduated eight seniors last year many of whom were four-year starters. The expectation for 2018 is to get back to the fundamentals, work hard and compete in every game. If the right players step up the wins and losses will take care of themselves and we will have a successful season.



Champlin Park's Holly Blaska

► **DID YOU KNOW:** Holly Blaska (2018) is the school's all time home run leader, while Brittney Davis (2017) graduated as the record holder in numerous hitting categories over her four years at Champlin Park.

► **LETTERWINNERS RETURNING/LOST:** 4/8

► **GRADUATION LOSSES:** IF Brittney Davis (Class AAAA 2nd team All-State, All-NWSC, Toledo); IF Riley Husom (Hamline); IF Jordan Johnson; OF Laura Kloppner; IF Maegan Shuck; P Taylor Sloat; OF Stacy Smith; OF Vada Stoddard

RETURNING ROSTER						
Name	Gr	Pos	Ht	Bats	Thrs	
Holly Blaska	11	SS	6'0	L	R	
Julia Doran	12	OF				
Abby Gilk	10	IF				
Piper Otto	10	P/1B/OF	5'9			
Abigail Ressen	12	IF				
Baileigh Shuck	11	IF				
Grace Worwa	12	P				

► HOLLY BLASKA, Jr. SS

Hitting	Avg	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	SB	BB	K
	.508	37	33	6	0	5	27	18	10	4

- **HEIGHT:** 6'0
- **BATS/THROWS:** L / R

- **BREAKDOWN TOP 75 JUNIORS**
- **CLASS AAAA**
- **ALL-BREAKDOWN**

- **CLASS AAAA HM ALL-STATE**
- **ALL-NWSC**
- **COLLEGE:** Miami of Ohio

► **SCOUTING REPORT:** "Holly has a passion for the game of softball like no other. She is fast, strong and powerful. Holly's softball IQ is off the charts but yet she is coach able and ready to learn and get better. She could play any position in the field and plays SS for our team. Holly is an amazing hitter she is our school's all-time home run hitter and she is only going to be a junior this season. She also hits for average and her average has gone up every year so far. Her productivity in clutch situations is incredible." — Champlin Park coach Bryan Woodley

► **Give me a short scouting report on yourself as a player. What are your strengths?** Power hitting left-handed batter. Athletic and mobile shortstop with strong arm. Good team mate with high softball IQ.

► **Can you tell us one unusual thing about yourself that others may not know?** Participate in archery as a second sport.



► **What is the best part of playing high school softball and why?** I get to play my friends/ classmates and it helps me prepare for my rigorous summer schedule of playing at the national level.

► **Tell me about the outlook for your team this year. What are the strengths of your team?** Champlin Park will be a predominately young team with above average high school pitching.

► **What other activities are you involved in?** Archery.

► **What type of training do you do in the offseason?** I train year round with my club program (Midwest Speed).

► PIPER OTTO, So. P/1B/OF

- **HEIGHT:** 5'9

► **Give me a short scouting report on yourself as a player. What are your strengths?** I am loud on the field and I communicate with my team as much as I can. I can judge the ball where I think it is going to be and also where it is.

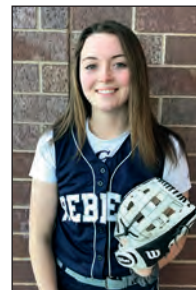
► **Can you tell us one unusual thing about yourself that others may not know?** I used to play flag football when I was little for four years.

► **What is the best part of playing high school softball and why?** The best part in playing high school softball is the different atmosphere than club. It's slower so it makes you have to think more and you get to play with girls at all different levels. You can learn from your older peers and they can help you through your experience through your high school career.

► **Tell me about the outlook for your team this year. What are the strengths of your team?** This year we lost a lot of our seniors so our team will be fairly young but we are excited to have a new aspect and us not relying on our seniors to guide us through those tough games. I think we will have a decent season and maybe even force an upset or two.

► **What other activities are you involved in?** I'm involved in FCA (Fellowship of Christian Athletes) and strength training at my school.

► **What type of training do you do in the offseason?** I play for a club team called Minnesota Force. I train year round. We have practice for pitching, hitting, and defense at least three times a week. I also do strength training at my high school in the winter.



IRONDALE

NICKNAME: Knights
TWITTER: @IHSsb18
CONFERENCE: Northwest Suburban
SECTION: 5AAAA
CONFERENCE RECORD: 1-12
OVERALL RECORD: 4-17
STATE TRIPS: none
COACH: Heather Hyatt
YEARS COACHING/RECORD: 5/

COACH'S COMMENTS: This year's team will have a mix of upper class and lower class. We are looking for our seniors and juniors to help out our younger players. We have a few strong leaders on the field and our pitcher is back this year. We also have a few key hitters back in our line-up.

► **LETTERWINNERS RETURNING/LOST:** 0/1

► **GRADUATION LOSSES:** OF Jianna LeMaire (St. Kate's); IF Rachael Peterson; IF Casey Seawell

RETURNING ROSTER						
Name	Gr	Pos	Ht	Bats	Thrs	
Haily Dabrowski	12	IF				
Jessica Eiting	12	IF				
Sophie Findell	12	CF	5'8	R	R	
Mary Herstel	12	IF				
Leah Newbauer	11	OF				
Sammie Ostlund	12	IF				
Annalise Scamehorn	11	C/1B/OF	5'8	L	R	
Mackensie Wolterstorff	11	IF				
Ali Yarithz	12	IF				

► HAILY DABROWSKI, Sr. IF

- **SCOUTING REPORT:** "Quick slapper. Was out most of the year due to injury." — Irondale coach Heather Hyatt

► SOPHIE FINDELL, Sr. CF

Hitting	Avg	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	SB	BB	K
	.279	8	17	3	0	0	8	2	1	4

- **HEIGHT:** 5'8
- **BATS/THROWS:** R / R

► **SCOUTING REPORT:** "Sophie is a very dependable player for our team. She is a utility player for us, and she can play any position. She is a strong hitter and makes great contact with the ball." — Irondale coach Heather Hyatt



► ANNALISE SCAMEHORN, Jr. C/1B/OF

Hitting	Avg	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	SB	BB	K
	.444	8	24	4	0	1	8	2	1	2

- **HEIGHT:** 5'8
- **BATS/THROWS:** L / R
- **BREAKDOWN TOP 75 JUNIORS**
- **ALL-NWSC**

► **SCOUTING REPORT:** "Annalise is a strong all-around athlete. She is solid defensively with a very strong arm. Offensively, she has a great on base percentage and is able to hit for power. Overall, she is a great leader for the team." — Irondale coach Heather Hyatt



► **Give me a short scouting report on yourself as a player. What are your strengths?** I feel my strength as a catcher is to anticipate a runner's movement on first to either throw them out stealing or pick them off first base. I also feel that my ability to play other positions on the field can be helpful to my team.

► **Can you tell us one unusual thing about yourself that others may not know?** When I am not practicing or playing a sport, I participate in the Hacky Sack Club at school.

► **What is the best part of playing high school softball and why?** I enjoy being outside in the spring and playing ball with my friends against the great competition in our conference.

► **Tell me about the outlook for your team this year. What are the strengths of your team?** Our team has seven returning starters who have all played a lot over the past years. Our experience should help us in difficult situations. We also are returning four of our top five hitters.

► **What other activities are you involved in?** National Honor Society, volleyball and basketball.

► **What type of training do you do in the offseason?** I participate in the MN Force program and do some type of training in the area of hitting, fielding, strength and conditioning at least one time per week in addition to playing three varsity sports.

MAPLE GROVE

7

NICKNAME: Crimson
CONFERENCE: Northwest Suburban
SECTION: 5AAAA
CONFERENCE RECORD: 9-4
OVERALL RECORD: 17-11
STATE TRIPS: 2006, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17
COACH: Jim Koltes

► **GRADUATION LOSSES:** IF Sydney Cashman; IF Erin Roehl; OF Taylor Rosacker; IF Eleanor Schutte (All-NWSC); IF Amanda Tyler; OF Taylor Wente (hockey at Minnesota)

?

WHO IS MINNESOTA'S BEST CLUTCH HITTER?

As part of our preseason coverage, we searched far and wide across the state to come up with great players in certain skill categories. The above five nominees are presented in no particular order. Certainly, it's just opinion, but we asked one of the top players what it takes to make this list.

ERIN HAWK, PROCTOR

EMMA FROST, FARMINGTON

CJ DECKER, HOWARD LAKE-W-W

AMBER KLUG, MAPLE LAKE

HOLLY BLASKA, CHAMPLIN PARK

Q: What do you think it means to be considered a top clutch hitter? What skills does a clutch hitter need?

A: clutch hitter is someone who can get a critical hit in a key situation. A clutch hitter needs to know their role and be able to get timely hits.

Q: Do you take pride in that label? Do you think it helps make you a leader on the field?

A: Yes because others see you as a leader by leading by example. Also by being a clutch hitter when you get those key hits it affects the team's energy which is a big part in the games.

Q: Any favorite moment when you used your bat to help your team win?

A: Freshman year I hit a walk-off homerun during our section tournament to win the game.

Q: What kind of special training do you do to develop your hitting ability?

A: I train with great coaches who help me with hitting in all aspects and especially mechanics and go to training often

Q: Is there anybody you try to pattern your game after and why?

A: There isn't really anyone who I try to pattern my game after because you can only do your best and not somebody else's best. I try to do my best for my team and be a leader for them.

Photo by Dave Hill / Breakdown.zenfolio.com

RETURNING ROSTER

Name	Gr	Pos	Ht	Bats	Thrs
Lauren Anderson	12	P			
Sophie Culhane	11	C/1B/OF	5'4	R	L
Ava Dueck	11	P/OF	5'9	R	R
Jenna Gruenig	9	IF			
Ellie Hosmann	10	IF			
Marie Pallansch	12	OF	5'10	L	R
Nikki Roeber	10	IF			
Tara Rosacker	11	OF			
Mavis Sachs	11	IF			
Mikalie Sides	11	IF			
Jade Tomashek	11	IF	5'4	R	R
Sophie Zwach	12	IF			

SOPHIE CULHANE, Jr. C/1B/OF

Hitting	Avg	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	SB	BB	K
	.300	14	27	9	0	2	17	1	8	8

- HEIGHT: 5'4
- BATS/THROWS: R / L

Q: Give me a short scouting report on yourself as a player.

What are your strengths? I am an excellent power and situational hitter, I have a very strong arm behind the plate, and I am student of the game, always learning and trying to improve my IQ.

Q: Can you tell us one unusual thing about yourself that others may not know? Something unusual about myself is that I like to collect nutcrackers and smashed pennies.

Q: What is the best part of playing high school softball and why? The best part about playing high school softball is representing my school. Being from Maple Grove, our team has many high, athletic expectations which we find fun in the challenge of fulfilling them.

Q: Tell me about the outlook for your team this year. What are the strengths of your team?

Our team this year will be strong with a returning core of eight key players. This core, along with the high potential of the new players, will set us up for success with great hitting and pitching.

Q: What other activities are you involved in? In high school, besides softball, I am active in the band program.

Q: What type of training do you do in the offseason? In the off-season, I have practice around four times a week for my club team, and I lift and do cardio on every day besides those. As well as practice and working out, I coaching with Minnesota Fastpitch Academy, which helps me to build my leadership skills and enhance my knowledge of the sport.



AVA DUECK, Jr. P/OF

Hitting	Avg	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	SB	BB	K
	.421	19	40	11	0	5	27	0	11	12

Pitching	W	L	SV	ERA	IP	H	ER	BB	K
	11	10	1	1.68	150	0	36	41	104

- HEIGHT: 5'9
- BATS/THROWS: R / R
- BREAKDOWN TOP 75 JUNIORS
- ALL-NWSC

Q: Give me a short scouting report on yourself as a player. What are your strengths?

If I had to describe my strengths, I would say that I am very good at staying calm and holding a presence on the mound. I like to think I am a good leader on the team.

Q: Can you tell us one unusual thing about yourself that others may not know? One interesting thing about me is that I learned Latin for four years. Now I have fallen away from learning it, but it still comes in handy in other languages and even everyday life.

Q: What is the best part of playing high school softball and why? The best part of playing high school softball to me is the competition and the fun relationships that I get to make outside of my club team as well as my grade. I have met so many girls that I wouldn't of talked to otherwise.



Q: Tell me about the outlook for your team this year. What are the strengths of your team? I am really excited about our team this year. We have all gotten a bit older and stronger, which will really help us hitting. Our fielding will also improve greatly, although we will have to adjust after losing some strong fielders last year. Overall, I think our strengths will be a consistent line up and solid coaching all around.

Q: What other activities are you involved in? While most of my time is taken up with softball, I really enjoy being a part of FCA or Fellowship of Christian Athletes. I became a student leader in that this year, which is really exciting. In past years, I've also been a part of Mock Trial and Debate.

Q: What type of training do you do in the offseason? My off-season is usually packed full of training. I love it. In the summer and fall, my club team signs us up for tournaments all around the country! My favorite one is PGF Nationals in California. It's also really fun to go to Orlando in the late fall. These tournaments are usually pretty competitive so we practice every week day in the summer and as much as we can in the fall. In the winter, we typically focus on getting stronger, but the schedule is a lot looser. We practice three times a week and then have dome games on

Saturday. I also enjoy taking pitching lessons once a week with Missy Beseres. It's definitely a lot of practice and sometimes it gets hard, but it's my favorite sport.

MARIE PALLANSCH, Sr. OF

Hitting	Avg	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	SB	BB	K
	.414	26	41	3	0	0	5	19	8	12

- HEIGHT: 5'10
- BATS/THROWS: L / R
- ALL-NWSC

Q: Give me a short scouting report on yourself as a player. What are your strengths?

I have been a left-handed slap hitter for the past six years. One of my strengths includes my bunting skills; I am able to bunt almost every strike pitched to me in any location, whether it be hard



Maple Grove's Ava Dueck

Photos by Tim Kolehmainen / Breakdown.zenfolio.com

or soft, and I am able to get on base very often just by bunting to first or third. Another one of my strengths is my speed. I can run from home to first very quickly and I steal 2nd base almost every time I get on first. My other strength is that I am very motivated by my statistics. If my statistics are low, that makes me want to increase them by working three times as hard in practice so the effect will show in the next couple games. If my statistics are high, that motivates me to beat those numbers by even more.

Q: Can you tell us one unusual thing about yourself that others may not know? A couple years ago, one of my teammates made up the nickname "Maris" for me while we were in Florida for our spring training trip. It became so popular with my team that even my coach starting calling me that. It spread around my school and now almost everyone I know calls me Maris.

Q: What is the best part of playing high school softball and why? My favorite highlight of playing high school softball has been playing in the state tournament. It's so fun to be able to play against the best teams in the state. So far in all the state tournaments I have been in, my team has finished 2nd, 3rd, and 6th. Another highlight of the high school season is the spring training trip to Florida. Softball is an exciting sport to play and it's even more fun when you're playing against great competition, but the memories with the team and lessons learned from the coaches are just as important. That's why I think our trip to Florida is a great way to incorporate all of these aspects into one.

Q: Tell me about the outlook for your team this year. What are the strengths of your team?

The outlook for our team is looking good this year. We have an amazing batting line up which includes slapping, power hitting, bunting for hits, and moving runners. Our pitching/catching is phenomenal, our infield is solid, and our outfield has speed and agility. I think our biggest strength is that our team picks each other up very well. I am very confident in our team that we will make it to the state tournament again this season and finally bring home the gold medal.

Q: What other activities are you involved in? Besides softball, I am involved in a leadership program called Link Crew that assists incoming students to learn about their new school an meet new people. I am also involved in National Honor Society, which is a volunteer organization based on merit and honesty, junior Achievement, which is a business club, and last year I traveled to Costa Rica on a service trip with the high school.

Q: What type of training do you do in the offseason? During the off-season, I play with my summer team during the late months of spring and all through summer. Every week, I also go to dome ball practices/games where we tune our skills and get more reps. The other captain's and I have also been running captain's practices three months in advance for tryouts for the younger players. We do conditioning, running, and reps of offense and defense.

JADE TOMASHEK, Jr. IF

Hitting	Avg	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	SB	BB	K
	.416	33	42	9	0	4	22	5	11	11

- HEIGHT: 5'4
- BATS/THROWS: R / R
- BREAKDOWN TOP 75 JUNIORS
- ALL-NWSC

Q: Give me a short scouting report on yourself as a player. What are your strengths?

I consider myself a confident player who looks out for her teammates and keeps the game fun for everyone while still maintaining the intensity and motivation that it takes to win games.

Q: Can you tell us one unusual thing about yourself that others may not know? One fun fact about me is that I lived in Guadalajara, Mexico for three years and my first language was Spanish.

Q: What is the best part of playing high school softball and why? The best part about high school softball is the relationships I build with players and coaches. I also enjoy that I get the opportunity to play some of the best players in the state.



Q: Tell me about the outlook for your team this year. What are the strengths of your team? This year we have an older team made up of mostly juniors and seniors, and a lot of our team is returning with the experience and drive to make it to state after getting a taste of it last year. I think a strength on this team is our pitching staff. With Ava Dueck's speed and spin and Lauren Anderson's movement they compliment each other very well and it will benefit the team a lot.

Q: What other activities are you involved in? I am committed to playing softball all year.

Q: What type of training do you do in the offseason? In the offseason I train with my club ball team at Game Face in Brooklyn Park twice a week and when that is over I like to do some sort of cross training to stay in shape. To keep my hitting up, I attend weekly lessons with a private instructor.

OSSEO

NICKNAME: Orioles
CONFERENCE: Northwest Suburban
SECTION: 5AAAA
CONFERENCE RECORD: 5-8
OVERALL RECORD: 10-14
STATE TRIPS: 1984, 88, 92, 93, 2008, 09
COACH: Eric Ruska

► **GRADUATION LOSSES:** C Andrea Dianslake (All-NWSC); IF Amanda Fasching; IF April Jacobs; P Katie Johnson; IF Taylor Kottke; IF Jenna Kulla; OF Laine Ruska (All-NWSC); OF Anna Zeltinger

Name	Gr	Pos	Ht	Bats	Thrs
Hannah Carmon	11	IF			
Brianna Jones	11	IF			
Sela Roche	12	OF			
Kaytlynne Schulte	10	IF			
Aleah Techam	12	OF			
Sy'Rai Trice	10	IF			

PARK CENTER

NICKNAME: Pirates
CONFERENCE: Northwest Suburban
SECTION: 5AAAA
CONFERENCE RECORD: 1-13
OVERALL RECORD: 2-18
STATE TRIPS: 1977, 80, 86, 89, 90, 91, 96, 97, 98, 2001, 10 Champs, 11 Champs
COACH: Neena Mathers
YEARS COACHING/RECORD: 2/3-27

COACH'S COMMENTS: We bring back many returning players with a year of experience under their belt. This will give us the opportunity to continue to grow and become stronger. We have strong fielding in the infield and outfield. Our hitting improved 150% from the previous season. The players are more expected to put the bat in the ball, which will increase runs scored.

► **LETTERWINNERS RETURNING/LOST:** 6/3
 ► **GRADUATION LOSSES:** 2B Kristen Audette; 3B Shianne Kennedy; C Samantha Torbog

Name	Gr	Pos	Ht	Bats	Thrs
Shannara Brown	11	OF			
Alexus Colbert	11	P			
Makenna Dogus	8	IF			
Emily Grant	11	OF			
Lydia Hoff	8	IF			
Jessa Holden	12	P			
Kiara Hurt	11	C			
Kaycie Johnson	10	OF			
Savanna Kennedy	10	IF			
Lola Lallias	8	P			
Alexus Lockhart	9	C			
Tiana Love	9	C			
Ellie Mankowski	9	IF			
Kaylee Oefke	8	OF			
Maya Petrick	11	OF			
Hannah Ruohonen	10	SS	5'4	R	R

HANNAH RUOHONEN, So. SS

Hitting	Avg	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	SB	BB	K
	.346	9	18	8	0	0	9	2	6	9

- **HEIGHT:** 5'4
- **BATS/THROWS:** R / R
- **ALL-NWSC**

SCOUTING REPORT: "Hannah is a level headed player who leads her team in hard work and effort. Hannah plays through challenging situations and always keeps a positive head on her shoulders. Hannah is a veteran being on Varsity as a 7th grader, and is unstoppable in the short stop position. Hannah's bat creates opportunities for her team and often leads the team in hitting." — Park Center coach Neena Mathers

Q: Give me a short scouting report on yourself as a player. What are your strengths? I believe my strengths are confidence in the field at shortstop and making good decisions at the plate and on the field.

Q: Can you tell us one unusual thing about yourself that others may not know? I used to be a competitive curler.

Q: What is the best part of playing high school softball and why? I am a very competitive person and I love getting to play this sport with my friends.

Q: Tell me about the outlook for your team this year. What are the strengths of your team? We are a young team with much potential.

Q: What other activities are you involved in? Choir.

Q: What type of training do you do in the offseason? Indoor hitting and weight lifting.

ROGERS

NICKNAME: Royals
CONFERENCE: Mississippi 8 Blue
SECTION: 5AAAA
CONFERENCE RECORD: 9-4
OVERALL RECORD: 15-10
STATE TRIPS: 2005
COACH: Jerry Bruns

► **GRADUATION LOSSES:** IF Coral Anderson; P Melea Bruns (All-M8 offensive MVP); IF Elizabeth Liebert; P Kaitlynn Lloyd (All-M8); IF Allie Smith

Name	Gr	Pos	Ht	Bats	Thrs
Emma Bresin	11	IF			
Krysta Felber	12	IF			
Madisen Frausto	12	OF			
Maddie Hansen	12	OF			
Breanna Hetchler	9	IF			
Raegan Kimbler	8	IF			
Kalista Kragt	9	OF			
Grace Mammen	9	P			
Lauren Matzke	12	IF			
Meaka Nowak	11	C			
Allie Roberts	11	IF			
Riley Roden	10	IF			

KRYSTA FELBER, Sr. IF

- **ALL-M8**

MEAKA NOWAK, Jr. C

- **ALL-M8**

RILEY RODEN, So. IF

- **ALL-M8**

SPRING LAKE PARK

NICKNAME: Panthers
CONFERENCE: Northwest Suburban
SECTION: 5AAAA
CONFERENCE RECORD: 5-8
OVERALL RECORD: 11-16
STATE TRIPS: 2016
COACH: Lori Lightbody

COACH'S COMMENTS: The Panthers hope to compete in the conference and finish in the middle. The keys to success will be consistent pitching and hitting. We have some returning young talent that have worked hard in the offseason.

► **GRADUATION LOSSES:** OF Sarah Fruzyrna; P Halley Jones; IF Lexi Loegering; IF Jasz Rickenbach (All-NWSC)

Name	Gr	Pos	Ht	Bats	Thrs
Kylee Cruys	12	OF			
Erin Donnelly	11	IF			
Lauren Keefe	11	P			
Jessica Miller	11	IF			
Abbi Nill	12	IF			
Amara Packey	12	P			
Breah Parrish	12	IF			
Madison Pich	10	IF			
MaKenzee Stone	10	C/OF	5'3	R	R
Alyssa Teachman	12	OF			
Jade Wieland	12	OF			

MAKENZEE STONE, So. C/OF

Hitting	Avg	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	SB	BB	K
	.315	12	29	5	0	0	11	0	2	11

- **HEIGHT:** 5'3
- **BATS/THROWS:** R / R
- **ALL-NWSC**

SCOUTING REPORT: "Kenzee is a strong aggressive player who will put the ball in play. She has done an outstanding job behind the plate controlling game and has a great arm. She has a great work ethic." — Spring Lake Park coach Lori Lightbody

Q: Give me a short scouting report on yourself as a player. What are your strengths? I think my biggest strength is my arm, my over hand speed is 65. I'm a catcher and an outfielder. I think I'm about equal for both positions, but I am probably a little better at catching. Another strength is hitting I hit .350 during school ball and .500 during summer ball.

Q: Can you tell us one unusual thing about yourself that others may not know? One other hobby I have is bowling. I grew up bowling every Saturday on a league, my highest game is 215.

Q: What is the best part of playing high school softball and why? I love playing with my school friends and just having fun with them. I also love sections week because all we talk about are the games, we watch them as soon as they are up on YouTube. Also playing against my summer teammates is always fun the small comments we make to each other when their up to bat and I'm catching. School ball is a way to have fun with my friends and play the sport I love with them.

Q: Tell me about the outlook for your team this year. What are the strengths of your team? I think we will have good defense, we might struggle pitching, but I think our defense will make up for it.

Q: What other activities are you involved in? Last year I was on the varsity bowling team and lettered. This year I played tennis instead and really enjoyed it and plan on continuing that throughout high school.

Q: What type of training do you do in the offseason? I play for Midwest Speed and throughout the winter we have training 2-4 nights a week and a couple dome tournaments. I also play Monday night dome ball with SLP.

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SEASON PREVIEW

CLASS AA

FAB 15 RANKINGS

- 1. Maple Lake
- 2. Zumbrota-Mazeppa
- 3. Annandale
- 4. Pipestone Area
- 5. Esko
- 6. Rochester Lourdes
- 7. St. Peter
- 8. Park Rapids Area
- 9. Dilworth-Glyndon-Felton
- 10. Rush City
- 11. Morris/Chokio-Alberta
- 12. Windom Area
- 13. St. Agnes
- 14. Norwood-Young America
- 15. Jordan

ALL-BREAKDOWN



Amber Klug
Maple Lake



Elizabeth Hackbarth
Spectrum



Calli Maki
Maple Lake



Emilee Wilson
Esko



Sarah Johnson
Annandale



Kylee Pachel
Park Rapids Area



Shelby Bloemendaal
Pipestone Area



Lydia Plechaty
Jordan



CJ Decker
Howard Lake-
Waverly-Winsted



Maurissa Isaacs
Windom Area



Bridget Murphy
Providence Academy



Davriana Horvath
Esko

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ZUMBROTA-MAZEPPA BACK-TO-BACK SURPRISE

AFTER A SLOW START TO THE SEASON, COUGARS
BEGAN TO BELIEVE...AND WON ANOTHER TITLE

HEATHER RULE | BREAKDOWN SPORTS MEDIA

Look at the Zumbrota-Mazeppa softball team's record 12 games into last season, and they weren't very good. The defending Class 2A state champions were 7-5. Then they went to the Jackson County Central tournament to face the eventual Class 1A champion, New York Mills.

Zumbrota-Mazeppa won the game 10-0 — a "very convincing 10-0 win," said coach **Kevin Nelson**.

"That was the turning point of the season for the girls to realize, 'hey, that's the No. 1 team in the state in Class 1A, and we just 10-runned them.'"

About that rough start, then-junior **Lyndsey Quam** remembers the announcer at their field introducing the team as "the defending 2016 state champions." After a few losses, Lyndsey said their coach put a stop to that because 2017 had a new team.

"When Mr. Nelson did that, it kind of opened our eyes and made us kind of think, 'Are we good enough? Are we going to be able to go back to the state championship game?'" Lyndsey said. "We kind of came in (to the season) a bit high and mighty, I think."

So, she and her teammates realized they needed to work harder and be better in order for that to happen. They held each other accountable and started putting in more effort, Lyndsey said.

The Cougars already achieved quite a victory even before their crowning as state champs. They defeated rival Rochester Lourdes twice in section play, a team that came in with just one loss on the season at the time.

Lyndsey's younger sister, **Natalye Quam**, remembers the wins against Lourdes and the coaches telling them they had nothing to lose. Just prove they're good enough to get back to the state tournament.

"I think that really just took off all the stress of being there," Natalye said. "We all just played the way we know how to play."

As the No. 2 seed at state, the Cougars won their first two games each by 9-4 margins over St. Agnes and then Esko. Then they reached the state championship game to face an undefeated Maple Lake team. With three unearned runs in the

third inning and seven innings on the mound from Lyndsey, the Cougars handed Maple Lake its only loss of the year with a 4-1 victory to complete the back-to-back run.

"It was really unexpected but also so much more rewarding," Natalye said.

The back-to-back state titles are the only ones in program history, though they've been to the state tournament a total of five times since 2008, including back-to-back trips in 2010 and 2011. They lost their two games each in 2008 and 2010 before winning the consolation championship in 2011.

In 2014 and 2015, Zumbrota-Mazeppa lost to eventual state champion Kasson-Mantorville in Class 2A, Section 1 tournament play. So, some pressure for Zumbrota-Mazeppa's solid program mounted, especially in 2016 when they had ace pitcher **Morgan Olson**, "our top pitcher we've ever had" and future Division I softball player back for her senior campaign, according to Nelson.

"There were some real expectations there," Nelson said. "It's our turn to maybe step up and win a state championship."

In 2016, the Cougars outscored three state tournament opponents 11-1 and didn't surrender an earned run in the tournament on their way to their first-ever state title. They beat Pequot Lakes 7-0 in the title game.

With a title under their belt, a lot of teams might face even more pressure the next year as they try to go back-to-back. But for Zumbrota-Mazeppa, the pressure was off in 2017. They lost seven seniors to graduation and six starters of the title-winning team. They only had one player at the same position as the year before and they added five new position players to the mix in 2017.

Sure, there were dreams and a hopefulness of returning to the state tournament and winning it all again, according to Nelson.

"But I think to actually do it was pretty phenomenal," Nelson said. "Pretty amazing when you take into consideration there was, oh, let's see... our first baseman was new, our second baseman was new..."

"I don't know if you can really expect them to win a state championship when there was so much turnover."

THREE DECADES IN THE MAKING

Nelson took over the program 29 years ago after coaching for just one year at Windom Area High School. The Zumbrota-Mazeppa athletic director talked Nelson into taking the job, during a period when the softball program had gone through plenty of changeover with previous coaches staying for just one season. Nelson was also the head wrestling coach for his first 10 years at Zumbrota-Mazeppa.



(A state title) was really unexpected but also so much more rewarding.

— NATALYE QUAM

He recalls the end-of-season party after his first year coaching the Cougars. He told his players he was going to return the following season, and the response was a bunch of teary-eyed softball players. Nelson couldn't figure out what was going on.

"Well, they were so happy that somebody was actually willing to stick with them for more than one year," Nelson said.

When he started, Zumbrota-Mazeppa wasn't the best softball team in the area, Nelson said. Early on, playing about .500 ball was about as good as they could expect, he said. Nelson got to work turning things around, starting with a summer program with four local communities. That .500 team turned into a program that's won 20 games each season for the past 20 years, with one exception in a rainout-heavy year, Nelson noted.

"He's a legend here, and he definitely knows how to develop players into great girls and great athletes," Lyndsey said.

Just a few years into his tenure, Nelson's team won its first conference championship, "and since then, we've won a lot of them," Nelson said. More

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

recently, he noted his team has been in the sub-section championship games in 15 of the past 17 years.

"It's been a great run," Nelson said. "I've had a lot of kids that believed in the system."

The program saw tremendous growth in numbers, too. They started out with 34 uniforms for seventh through 12th graders in the softball program when Nelson began his time at Zumbrota-Mazeppa. Once he righted the ship after a few years, the numbers blossomed to 85 to 90 girls in that same age range coming out for softball in the mid- to late 1990s, according to Nelson. They're back down to 45 to 50 players in the past five years.

He hopes to see some larger numbers again after the success in the past two years, and they're seeing that in their freshmen and eighth-grade classes. When they had large numbers, some players didn't see varsity action until their senior season, and some didn't want to stick around the program for all that time if they weren't good enough to play or make varsity, according to Nelson.

Three seniors on the 2017 team finally got their varsity calling, and they were important pieces.

"Hats off to those kids who hung with it," Nelson said. "They were waiting for their one opportunity and made the most of it."

YOU CAN'T WIN WITHOUT PITCHING

One of the biggest strengths for the Cougars is their dominant pitching performances, going back to the 1996 season, according to Nelson. From then on the strength of pitching has been one of the most prominent factors for Zumbrota-Mazeppa's success as they're competed for section championships for the last 20-plus seasons.

"We've had just a real strong run of quality pitchers, and that's why we're in it every year," Nelson said.

For the past six or seven years, he's had his pitchers and catchers come in for extra morning practice three times a week. All just to work on pitching and catching. That extra time, plus a team commitment to lifting weights three times a week, is all part of the program's recent success.

If not for the solid pitching, they'd have to rely on outscoring teams 12-10, for example, in order to win games, according to Nelson.

The Quam sisters as a pitcher/catcher duo have helped lead the way for the program recently. They've been an integral part of the team – even if Nelson had to convince Lyndsey to strut her pitching skills. He saw some natural athleticism within her.

"Lyndsey was really not even interested in pitching as a sophomore, and I kind of convinced her she needed to stick with it because I saw something special out of her," Nelson said. "And she did, and thank goodness she did."

Lyndsey hoped for a starting spot on varsity as a sophomore, but with Olson as the star pitcher, she knew a spot on the mound wasn't likely. She was hesitant with pitching because she said she struggled mentally on the mound as an eighth- and ninth-grader.

"As soon as I would throw some balls or not strike people out... I would really get down on myself," Lyndsey said. "So it was definitely



Zumbrota-Mazeppa's Riley Schliep

Tim Kolehmainen / Breakdown.zenfolio.com

something to overcome, and Mr. Nelson wanted me to keep pitching."

As a sophomore, Lyndsey played second base and went 40-plus plays without making an error, according to Nelson. She went in during the mornings to pitch, just for fun, which helped her a lot because the pressure was off and she thrived, Lyndsey said. Nelson convinced her that the team couldn't survive on just one pitcher the following year, so she split her time between pitching and playing shortstop as a junior.

Her coaches have helped her with accuracy, plus she said her speed on the mound seems to throw hitters off.

"I don't think they realize just how fast I'm throwing," Lyndsey said.

The Quam sisters are both very good with a bat in their hands as well. They can bunt, hit the ball in the gap and use their speed on the base paths. Lyndsey is also one of the most talented players Nelson has worked with in his 29 years of coaching, he said. She can relax and just rely on her athleticism with her strong and accurate arm

to get the job done on the mound, according to Nelson.

"She's freaky talented," Nelson said. "She's extremely good as far as an athlete goes, but then she's extremely good with her teammates, too. And she doesn't put a lot of pressure on herself."

Plus, she tosses the ball to her sister, who's very solid behind the plate and improved a lot last year, according to Nelson. The sisters started playing competitive softball in third grade, have been with Zumbrota-Mazeppa since seventh-grade and earned starting spots on varsity as sophomores.

The pitcher/catcher duo works well together because of the trust they have and obviously knowing each other so well. Being so close is helpful.

"I think that it's definitely an advantage because since we are so close because we're sisters, we can tell each other what works, what doesn't," Natalie said. "We're not afraid to tell each other what we need to work on."

LOOKING AHEAD

The Cougars are in a similar spot coming into this season as last year: They've lost a lot to graduation and will be a young team with just two seniors. They'll have new starters at second base, third base, shortstop and center field. They'll need some underclassmen to step up and fill the voids. The good news is they have the Quam sisters back, which is a big part of the team success, according to Nelson.

He expects there will be some pressure for his team once again. Though it's tough to get too caught up in the best laid plans.

"You hope to win a state championship, but when you start planning things like that, that's usually when things don't work out," Nelson said.

The Quam sisters know their team will have a target on its back, especially with rival Lourdes. At the same time, 2018 is another new team, so it will be different, according to Lyndsey.

"Key seniors graduated, and we're going to have a lot of new young kids that are going to fill on the varsity roster," Lyndsey said. "We've just got to find our groove."

"I think by the end of the year, we'll be on top of our game and definitely could be in the running to contend [for] another state title."

Even with all the losses to graduation, Nelson noted the biggest loss for the 2018 season is assistant coach **Mike Matuska**. With his daughter **Tara Matuska** graduated from the program, Matuska will shift over to help out with baseball, where he son plays as a sophomore.

Nelson credits Matuska as being a huge part of why the Zumbrota-Mazeppa softball program has seen such success and two state championships during his 10 years as an assistant coach. It will be difficult to not have him back, Nelson said.

The replacement will either be **Nikki Yusten**, a former Cougars player and current assistant coach within the program, or Nelson's daughter Megan, who pitched on the state tournament teams in 2010 and 2011 and will join the coaching staff this season.

No matter who's by his side, Nelson will continue to focus on what's made his program do so well over the years: Pitching and fundamentals. They worry about performance sometimes more than the win-loss results, as a program that schedules some of the toughest competition in the state, according to Nelson.

"I would say fundamentals [are] the key to our success," Nelson said. "We're just fundamentally very sound and very knowledgeable of the game."

With all the success Nelson has helped create in Zumbrota-Mazeppa's softball program, Nelson said he's happy for his players more than anything. He's won a lot of games in his career – more than 500 – and was inducted into the Minnesota Fastpitch Coaches' Association Hall of Fame in 2014 and honored with a lifetime achievement award from the Minnesota Minute Men.

One thing matters above the rest for Nelson.

"I would trade any of those in to see a kid win a state championship," Nelson said. 🏆



Zumbrota-Mazeppa's Lyndsey Quam

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