

Marion faces busy start to baseball season

Written by Jim Ecker

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(Editor's Note: This is the fourth in a series of preseason stories about Metro baseball teams. Next: Prairie)

The Marion Indians, featuring a young pitching staff, will open the 2011 baseball season with five big games in four days next week.

They'll play three games in the Bob Vrbicek Metro Tournament on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, then host Dyersville Beckman in a Wamac Conference doubleheader Thursday.

"With our young pitching staff," Coach Steve Fish cracked, "I'm kind of hoping for some rain."

Garrett Fortner and Dalton Combs, who combined for 14 of Marion's 25 wins last season, graduated. Jake McDonald, who went 4-2 last year, is not playing baseball this season. Neither is Justin Dolly, who made six appearances for Marion in 2010.

"Instead of having some proven kids on the mound, we'll have to start the year off with some inexperience," Fish said. "But I really like our defense and I really like the way our kids are throwing the ball right now."

Fish will build his staff around junior southpaw Cale Cannoy (5-3, 3.07) and a young group that features five left-handers. He described the development of his pitching staff as "crucial" to the team's success.

He listed Tyler Hedtke and Joshua Davila as pitchers who could help this season, along with several other candidates.

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The Indians will be tested quickly in the Metro tournament, starting with the opener against Cedar Rapids Washington on Monday. That game is scheduled for 5 p.m. at Xavier High School.

Fish hopes the pitching develops rapidly, because he thinks the rest of the ballclub is solid. "I think we'll be pretty good," he said. "We have some quality kids back."

It starts up the middle for Marion, with Zach Nielsen (.390) at shortstop and Kasey Semler (.413) at second base. "I really like those two up the middle. They're as good as I've had, probably," Fish said.

Nielsen hit three homers and drove in 29 runs last year when the Indians finished 25-13. He was charged with 26 errors in 38 games, however, and will be looking to reduce that total.

Semler, who has signed to play basketball at Kirkwood Community College, also hit three homers and collected 32 RBIs. Semler has made Class 3A all-state teams in basketball and baseball during his successful prep career.

Trev Biery, who played third base last season, had surgery this year to repair a rotator cuff and torn labrum. Fish hopes Biery (.348) can serve as the designated hitter or play first base by mid-season.

Mitch Wagner, a transfer from Kennedy, could be in position to replace Biery at third base.

Dusty Albaugh (.391) returns in right field and Andrew Charipar (.393) is back in center. Albaugh, a four-sport athlete, told the Metro Sports Report on Sunday that he plans to attend Iowa State this fall and not play sports in college, but left the door open a crack if something develops this summer.

Fish said Addison Johnson will be the starting catcher after serving as the understudy the last

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two years. Byron Fish, the coach's son, is one of the candidates for left field.

Marion has proven hitters with Semler (.413), Albaugh (.391), Nielson (.390), Charipar (.393) and Biery (.348). Fish is confident the Indians will score runs, but the trick could be trying to outscore the opposition.

"We'll put a good product on the field," he said. "There will be some nights when it's interesting."

Marion made the Class 3A state tournament for the first time in school history in 2006 with a strong club, but the Indians lost in the substate finals in 2008, 2009 and 2010. "We'd like to get over the hump," Fish said.