

Metro softball forecast: Jeff, Xavier elite

Written by Jake Koolbeck

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The Metro Sports Report will cover Cedar Rapids and Marion softball teams for the second time this season since coming to existence in January of 2011. To kick off the start of the season I will attempt to breakdown the upcoming campaign with an overview of the local schools and a prediction of how each school will do.

Xavier and Jefferson have been atop the Metro for many years and that was no different last season as Jefferson finished with the area's best record at 32-7 followed by Xavier at 29-13.

Despite the great regular seasons, both teams came up short in their quest for a state berth. Xavier fell to Iowa City West in the regional semifinal and Jefferson dropped an extra-inning game in its regional final against West Des Moines Dowling.

Leaving last year in the past, I see familiar results for the Metro area in the 2012 season. Jefferson and Xavier will remain the elite teams and compete for conference titles and state berths.

The rest of the Metro should be improved and could make this season a fun one.

[Jefferson](#) will be the top team in the Metro again this year as they return a the majority of a very good 2011 team, including top hitter Rachel Sedlacek (.447, 11 HR, 31 RBI) and ace pitcher Hannah Petersen (18-4, 0.88 ERA).

After nine straight trips to the state tournament Jefferson has come up just short the last two years, falling in the regional final twice. This year's team has state on its mind and I expect them to find a way to win the big one and get to Fort Dodge.

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Likewise, [Xavier](#) has been near the top of the Metro for many years and that should not change this season. The Saints will have to replace three-fourths of an extremely productive infield, but is very capable of doing so. Xavier will have an adjustment to make with the absence of Coach Brian Erbe, who recently underwent triple-bypass heart surgery.

With pitchers Erin Drahozal (14-5, 1.88) and Jacey Wiebold (15-8, 1.2) back this year, the Saints' pitching will be solid enough to allow the infield to figure things out. Add the strong bats of Audey Richards, Emily Walton and Courtney Colston in the mix and the Saints will be a strong team in 2012.

After the two elite programs the Metro gets a little more complicated. The middle of the Metro should see improvement from teams like Linn-Mar, Marion and Kennedy but it will be hard to say which way these teams will go.

[Marion](#) should have the experience to be the third best team in the Metro. The Indians lost only one player from a team that looked better than its 17-20 record in 2011.

Marion dropped a lot of close games last year. The experience of this group should turn those close games into wins as the Indians look to be an improved squad this year.

[Linn-Mar](#) is in a similar situation as its crosstown rivals. The Lions bring back a very experienced group. The difference for the Lions may be that they are still get young while the Indians are a veteran group.

Linn-Mar was 17-25 in 2011 and has a great opportunity to improve on that.

There are two big concerns for the Lions. They need to improve their pitching (5.13 team ERA) and have already suffered a huge loss before even taking the field as key contributor Ellie Rizer (.365, 8 HR, 24 RBI) will miss most of the season with a torn labrum.

[Prairie](#) and Kennedy are the next two in the Metro ranks from last year, but they could be headed in opposite directions this year.

[Kennedy](#) will bring back the majority of its team to be yet another very experienced Metro team, while Prairie loses a strong group from last year.

Looking at that, if Kennedy (8-32) uses the experience to its advantage it could leapfrog a Prairie (13-24) team looking to fill the spots of a great senior class from 2011.

Keep an eye on both teams early. How they start the year could be very telling in which direction they will go this season.

[Washington](#) (5-33) has been the Metro bottom feeder and has had troubles competing in the past. But the Warriors have continued to show great improvements under Coach Fanaye Wooldrik.

Washington, like Prairie, lost a very strong group of seniors but has the potential to fill those spots. The Warriors will have their normal struggles as they continue to build, but look for them to take another step forward in 2012.

A more detailed overview of the Metro teams can be found on each team's softball page and/or by clicking the hypertext links in this story.

To wrap up the outlook on the 2012 season I will give the community something to discuss with my predictions on how I think the Metro schools will do in the coming year.

I believe Jefferson is clearly the best team in the area and will finish with the best record in the Metro. Outside of the Metro I believe the J-Hawks' offense will be better this year and the bats, combined with the strong left arm of Peterson, will lead the J-Hawks back to Fort Dodge.

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Xavier has the pieces to be a very good team and I believe they will put it all together. I don't see them winning a conference title, but with the move to five classes this year the Saints should end their season in Fort Dodge, making it for the sixth time in the last 10 years.

Marion is very experienced and if the Indians pitch well they could be very tough in the Wamac. I predict a 10-game improvement for them as they push the top teams in the Wamac. When it comes to the postseason, I predict Marion will come up a little short as it likely will have to get through some very tough teams.

After the top three, I don't see any of the four other Metro schools competing for any type of title. I will stick my neck out and say Kennedy and Washington both reach double digit wins this year while Linn-Mar improves to a .500 team. As for Prairie, I think it stays fairly stagnate this year.

Now it's time to play ball. The season starts Monday.