

Written by Don Taylor
Sunday, 13 May 2012 20:24 -

The Metro Sports Report began covering high school baseball in Cedar Rapids and Marion last year, a few months after it launched the new website in January of 2011. As you may recall, I began the season with an overview of each of the local programs and offered a prognostication for each team's season.

It went over fairly well, so I'm giving it another shot this season. We'll see the results as the session unfolds.

Historically, Cedar Rapids and Marion have had good high school baseball programs with excellent players. This year should be more of the same.

Austin Christensen, the 2011 Iowa Gatorade Player of the Year, is a freshman at Nebraska now, leaving a void to fill locally. It could be filled by A.J. Puk, who is ranked as the 39th best prospect in the country by ESPN. Puk, only a junior, has already committed to play college baseball with the powerful Florida Gators.

The new season begins on Monday, May 21 with the annual Bob Vrbicek Metro Baseball Tournament, so it's a good time to take our first glance at the 2012 campaign. Kennedy and Marion made it to the state tournament in 2011, so it seems logical that maybe that's where we should start as we look at the 2012 season.

"Pitching is the name of the game," say baseball pundits. If that is true, and I believe it is, Marion and Kennedy are looking good this year.

Marion returns seven pitchers who were responsible for 27 wins last year and combined to give Coach Steve Fish 269 innings of work. The Indians also have Mitch Wagner (.384 batting average) and Joshua Davila (.350), two of the top 12 returning hitters in the Metro area.

The Wamac Conference boasts some very good baseball programs, and I think Marion is going to be very successful in the league again this season.

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Likewise, Kennedy Coach Bret Hoyer returns 17 wins and 113 innings. The Cougars have top hitters in Cody Bell (.381) and Devon Jacobus (.377). Jacobus leads all returning Metro players with 10 homers in 2011.

The Cougars have more. Kennedy's sophomore teams have garnered conference championships as well as Metro Tournament titles in each of the last two seasons.

I'm not sure I can say Kennedy or Marion will win the most games in the Metro area, but I believe one of these two teams is the favorite to claim the most victories. As I say that, be assured that there is competition.

Linn-Mar returns 19 wins and 219 innings from its pitching staff from last season. Its leading returning hitter is Michael Redmond (.384), who will be counted on to lead the Lions offensively.

Xavier returns Mack Mattke (5-3 pitching record,.413 batting average) and Corbin Woods (.371) as a nucleus to go with a talented group of juniors who were successful last season at the sophomore level.

Prairie has Brayton Carlson (.429), Brennan Hammer (.367) and Tyler Butz (.364) returning along with Jason Velvick, who missed most of his junior season as a result of an automobile accident (but who hit .400 as a sophomore).

The Hawks also have a number of juniors who, as sophomores, garnered a lot of successful varsity experience. Bryce Alberts (5-2) will be the leader of a relatively inexperienced but capable pitching staff.

The nucleus of the Washington team will be Puk (.436 average) along with Grant Dostal (5-2) and Noah Dostal (.358). Participation has been an issue at Washington, but new coach Tony Lombardi and his staff have aggressively addressed that issue. Washington will likely be a very young program this summer.

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Jefferson should have a number of seniors, but they represent very little experience at the varsity level. Chance Tiedtke (4-2) will lead the pitching staff. Christian Knox and Sam Techau are the only two returning players with more than 50 at-bats.

I am writing a more specific summary for each of the seven Metro programs for each school's baseball site and we'll add the new program at Cedar Valley Christian along the way.

I am going to stick my neck out and make some predictions.

I believe Marion is going to finish the summer with the best record in the Metro. The Indians have all of their 2011 pitching staff, plus they will be getting Cale Cannoy back to go with that staff. I believe if they score five runs a game they will win a lot of ballgames.

Kennedy has a good pitching staff, but none of them have proven to be overpowering at this stage of their development. Clearly you don't have to have a 90 mph fastball to win. Control is more important than velocity.

Prairie is going to have a loaded lineup, but doesn't have a pitching staff with a lot of varsity experience. Linn-Mar has experienced pitching, but not a lot of offensive experience. Xavier has Mattke and Woods plus a good group of young players, but they lack varsity experience.

That last paragraph should stimulate plenty of conversation all over town.

I will go with Kennedy, Prairie and Linn-Mar in that order among the local Mississippi Valley Conference teams. An argument could be made for any of these teams. These three teams could end up in any order or they could all be dead-even when the smoke clears.

Just a step behind Kennedy and Prairie and perhaps only a half-step behind Linn-Mar is Xavier.

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There are too many questions marks for me to move the Saints up to that next level yet.

I think Washington and Jefferson will get off to slower starts, because of the experience factor, but I believe both teams will improve throughout the season and neither should be taken lightly when the tournament rolls around. They will be competitive, but their lack of experience puts them at a disadvantage, especially early on.

Next summer, I will predict Cedar Valley Christian's season. This year, I predict that the Huskies will learn a lot as they put their new baseball program into action. I wish them good luck and much success.