

Metro baseball: It's getting close

Written by Don Taylor

Saturday, 19 March 2011 15:08 - Last Updated Sunday, 20 March 2011 07:05

Take a deep breath. Can you smell it? Baseballs are beginning to bloom.

Probably no one in the Metro area is more excited about high school baseball than I am, excepting, maybe, the coaches and the players themselves. Just like Major League fans in the offseason, I believe there is interest in your favorite high school team right now, along with interest in the opponents, even though the games will not begin until May.

The summer of 2010 was the first summer I wasn't coaching a baseball team or individual players at one level or another since the summer of 1973. I coached at Kennedy, Amana, WACO of Olds, West Branch, Riceville and Prairie. It's been a wonderful journey that I have shared with hundreds of great kids and parents.

As a product of the legendary Ray and Roy Allard Little League experience and Hall of Fame Coach George Thompson, I was taught by the very best to "respect your competition, to love the game and the kids who play it, and to encourage others to love it, too."

It is to that end that I present these team capsules of the Metro baseball teams for the 2011 season. The team capsules can be found on each of the seven baseball pages for each Metro school on the Metro Sports Report website.

I provide a team summary of each Metro varsity program. I have compiled statistics from Quick Stats regarding returning players, interviewed many of the head coaches and added my own perspective to each team's evaluation.

These evaluations are pure speculation and I hope they will provide ammunition to encourage discussion or maybe even motivate a team or a player. One of the beauties of high school baseball is that we know predictions will leave out a kid or a team that ends up having a dynamite season or hype a kid or team that doesn't do as well as we thought. It's all speculation.

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The format for each of my team sketches will reflect the following:

- Strengths
- Challenges
- Lost to graduation
- Proven players
- New faces
- Expectations

Each team summary is located in that school's baseball section. I base my summary on direct coach communication, the statistics, personal observation and what other coaches have conveyed in their expectations.

I hope you enjoy these preseason prognostications and that they hasten your return to those warm summer evenings of exciting high school baseball.

Following the predictions on this page are statistics for the top returning players.

2011 predictions

1. Kennedy has tradition, program and talent. That is tough to beat. The Cougars are the defending Class 4A state champions. They've lost some key players, but they have enough coming back to combine with underclassmen who may be more talented but not as experienced as the seniors they lost.

Kennedy is my pick for the best in the Metro area. With hard work, the Cougars have a real chance to make some history with two state titles in a row.

2. Marion has a talented core of returners and is stocked with young players to supplement the upperclassmen. The Indians will be as good as anybody in 3A baseball this summer. The young players will determine how far Marion develops, and I have confidence in Coach Steve Fish.

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I may be sticking Fish's neck out here, but I think Marion has the tools to get all the way to Des Moines.

3. Prairie has developed the program, and the Hawks clearly have a talented squad. The question is: Do they have the self-confidence?

Since joining the Mississippi Valley Conference, this program has not been near the top before, but nonetheless the Hawks have arrived. If they believe in themselves and commit to that all-important "team first" attitude, they are in for a great season.

This summer could be the beginning of a long string of success.

4. Xavier has the tradition, it has the program and it has some talent. The Saints will need to develop their pitching to succeed. I see that as a problem early, but Xavier always seems to develop pitching. This summer will be no different.

The Saints may struggle early, but they will begin to get tough about the second week in June and they will be fine. They are tournament-tested and they will have a good run.

5. (tie) Cedar Rapids Jefferson has some depth and team speed, but the J-Hawks have no stopper on the mound. That is not to say that any number of their pitchers can't become that guy, but it has yet to be proved.

Jefferson, too, has some inexperience to deal with. Numbers are not the problem, but time is the challenge. In Iowa you have three weeks to prepare a team for every possible baseball situation. If you have veterans, that is almost enough time. If you have inexperience, you don't have enough time.

Jefferson will be challenged early, but will come on about mid-June.

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5. (tie) Cedar Rapids Washington has a significant mound presence in Dakota Freese, and if the Warriors can plug their young people around their nucleus and grow as the season progresses, they will be very competitive.

Their biggest question is depth on the mound and throughout the lineup. Lack of numbers can sometimes prevent lineup changes that are necessary in game situations, and injury would be devastating to the Warriors. They have some younger people with great potential, but that potential must be realized to win games.

That will be their challenge. As the summer wears on, Washington will get tougher and tougher.

5. (tie) Linn-Mar has a core of five solid players but lacks experience beyond those five. The Lions do have numbers, perhaps more than any other Metro team.

The problem, once again, is that it takes time to practice and sort through all those players to find the right people for the right places and situations. Then you have to put all those pieces together and cultivate confidence.

The Lions may have the most variables to sort through this summer. But rest assured, they too, have enough skilled players to have a very successful season.

2010 batting averages

1. Austin Christensen, Kennedy, .492; 2. Eric Zenisek, Xavier, .429; 3. Jason Velvick, Prairie, .418; 4. Kasey Semler, Marion, .413; 5. Jordy Brown, Washington, .406; 6. Anthony Gagliardi, Prairie, .404; 7. Terrell Sykes, Kennedy, .398; 8. Tanner Unkel, Jefferson, .395; 9. Nate Even, Xavier, .395; 10. Andrew Charipar, Marion, .393; 11. Dusty Albaugh, Marion, .391; 12. Zach Nielsen, Marion, .390; 13. Jordan Stroschein, Linn-Mar, .390; 14. Ben Larison, Linn-Mar, .383; 15. Griffin Michael, Kennedy, .374; 16. Mac Mattke, Xavier, .374; 16. Colin Taylor, Kennedy, .368; 17. Devon Jacobus, Kennedy, .364; 18. Sam Kacena, Washington, .359; 19. Michael Rooney, Jefferson, .350.

RBIs

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1. Austin Christensen, Kennedy, 44; 2. Devon Jacobus, Kennedy, 36; 3. Terrell Sykes, Kennedy, 32; 4. Kasey Semler, Marion, 32; 5. Dustin Spaw, Prairie, 32; 6. Dan White, Washington, 31; 7. Ben Larison, Linn-Mar, 31; 8. Michael Rooney, Jefferson, 30; 9. Griffin Michael, Kennedy, 29; 10. Zach Nielsen, Marion, 29.

Runs scored

1. Kasey Semler, Marion, 45; 2. David Yancey, Kennedy, 41; 3. Tanner Unkel, Jefferson, 41; 4. Nate Even, Washington, 38; 5. Austin Christensen, Kennedy, 36; 6. Zach Nielsen, Marion, 35; 7. Terrell Sykes, Kennedy, 34; 8. Dan White, Washington, 34; 9. Griffin Michael, Kennedy, 33; 10. Blake Helms, Xavier, 33.

Home runs

1. Austin Christensen, Kennedy, 8; 2. Dan White, Washington, 6; 3. Michael Rooney, Jefferson, 5; 4. Anthony Gagliardi, Prairie, 5; 5. Jason Velvick, Prairie, 5; 6. Dustin Spaw, Prairie, 5; 7. Tanner Unkel, Jefferson, 4; 8. A.J. Puk, Washington, 4.

Stolen bases

1. Tanner Unkel, Jefferson, 31; 2. Michael Rooney, Jefferson, 25; 3. Griffin Michael, Kennedy, 19; 4. Mike Troendle, Washington, 15; 5. Jordy Brown, Washington, 13; 6. Aaron Hunter, Linn-Mar, 12; 7. Dusty Albaugh, Marion, 11; 8. Terrell Sykes, Kennedy, 10; 9. Kasey Semler, Marion, 10; 10. Brayton Spaw, Prairie, 10.

Pitching record

1. Austin Christensen, Kennedy, 9-4; 2. Dakota Freese, Washington, 6-3; 3. Ean McNeal, Xavier, 6-4; 4. Cale Cannoy, Marion, 5-3; 5. Dane Mehring, Xavier, 4-2; 6. Jake McDonald, Marion, 4-2; 7. Dustin Spaw, Prairie, 4-4; 8. David Yancey, Kennedy, 3-1; 9. Kevin Hosch, Xavier, 3-2; 10. Anthony Gagliardi, Prairie, 3-3; 11. Bailey Hollingsworth, Jefferson, 3-3.

Earned run average

□ **(Minimum 25 IP)**

1. Austin Christensen, Kennedy, 1.94; 2. Jake Stolley, Linn-Mar, 2.02; 3. Mac Mattke, Xavier, 2.66; 4. Dakota Freese, Washington, 2.69; 5. Jordan Atwater, Linn-Mar, 2.76; 6. Griffin Michael, Kennedy, 2.99; 7. Cale Cannoy, Marion, 3.07; 8. Dustin Spaw, Prairie, 3.49; 9. Anthony Gagliardi, Prairie, 4.29; 10. Ean McNeal, Xavier, 4.36; 11. Dane Mehring, Xavier,

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4.38; 12. Dan White, Washington, 4.59.

Strikeouts

1. Dakota Freese, Washington, 91; 2. Austin Christensen, Kennedy, 86; 3. Cale Cannoy, Marion, 62; 4. Ean McNeal, Xavier, 38; 5. Dustin Spaw, Prairie, 37; 6. David Yancey, Kennedy, 34; 7. Dane Mehring, Xavier, 34; 8. Justin Hofland, Prairie, 33; 9. Jake McDonald, Marion, 32; 10. Anthony Gagliardi, Prairie, 31; 11. Jake Stolley, Linn-Mar, 29.

Saves

1. Anthony Gagliardi, Prairie, 6; 2. Dustin Spaw, Prairie, 2; 3. Zach Zingula, Washington, 2.