

Lady Crusaders to face good pitching in district

By C.J. RISAK

STAFF WRITER

What to expect is the question.

It won't be easy for Madonna University's softball team to find that answer. The Lady Crusaders opponent in the NAIA Bi-District round — a best-of-three series that starts with a double-header at noon today and concludes at noon Friday (if necessary) at Massey Field in Plymouth — is Shawnee State, from Portsmouth, Ohio.

And there isn't much Madonna coach Jerry Abraham can say about the Bears except what he's heard second-hand: "I understand where they're strong in pitching and up the middle," he said.

As any softball coach will tell you, that's a pretty good place to start.

More precise answers must be found before Madonna takes the field against the Bears. If those answers go undiscovered, the Crusaders could have problems surviving the Bi-District.

What Shawnee has is a very young team. There are just two seniors and two juniors, to go with two sophomores and eight

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freshmen. Coach Ralph Cole has used two pitchers almost equally. Heather Birmingham, a freshman, is 10-4 with a 2.10 earned run average, 35 strikeouts and 22 walks in 90 innings.

Kim White, another freshman, is 10-3 with a 1.23 ERA, 65 strikeouts and 13 walks in 97 innings.

Like Madonna (35-8 for the season), the Bears — who come in with a 27-8 record — certainly can hit. Their team batting average is .322; White's .450 average, three triples, four home runs and 34 runs batted in are all team bests.

Brandi Rose, a sophomore (.423, 41 runs, 12 doubles, three homers, 23 RBI); Jill Walters, a junior (.343, 11 doubles, 24 RBI); and Judy Shupert, a senior (.353, nine doubles, 21 RBI) add to the arsenal. And yet, despite those impressive offensive totals, another number is more important to Abraham: the Bears' team ERA of 1.69.

"I imagine it will be a low-scoring pitcher's duel," said Abraham. That's a bit surprising,

considering his team's offensive output is even greater than Shawnee's. Madonna has a .385 team batting average entering last weekend's NAIA District 23 Tournament.

It also focuses the spotlight more intensely on Dawn Terral. But the Crusaders' senior pitcher has thrived in pressure situations. For the season, she is 28-7 with a 1.94 ERA.

"I think what Dawn does best is she gets better in bigger games," said Abraham. "Like last week: Her third game against Aquinas was her best. She's really giving it all she has. She really wants to win."

But then again, Abraham says the same about his entire team. "I just think if we keep playing like we did last weekend, we'll do well," he said. "We're going to win this thing."

"We're getting good pitching and playing good defense. They're focused, they're disciplined. These kids believe they can win, that's all that matters."

If they do, the Crusaders will be headed to the NAIA Softball World Series, hosted by Columbia College in Columbia, Mo.

Madonna baseball team begins post-season play

By C.J. RISAK

STAFF WRITER

The preseason test is over.

That's the only way to look at it. Sure, it was a long preseason — Madonna University's baseball team has already played 69 games — but it's finally done with.

Now the fun begins — the playoffs.

White could last just two games. That's the beauty of tournament time; every play means something.

The Fighting Crusaders enter the four-team NAIA District 23 playoffs as the No. 2 seed. They were 18-6 during the district's regular season, behind Aquinas College (21-3), Siena Heights (16-8) was third and Spring Arbor (14-10) fourth.

Madonna meets Siena Heights in Thursday's opening round at Grand Rapids' Kimball Field, while Aquinas and Spring Arbor face one another; both games are at noon.

There's nothing Crusader coach Mike George would like more than a repeat of last year's tournament, which Madonna hosted. His team had bested Aquinas in three-of-four regular-season meetings, but in the tourney it was Aquinas that emerged with the title.

PREVIEW

"They beat us three-of-four (in the regular season) this year, so maybe we can do the same to them," George said Monday.

There's no secret to advancing. The key element: "Pitching." George said. "We'll hit; we'll score our share of runs. Our defense is much-improved in the last couple of weeks."

Offense has been a Crusader strong point all season. The team batting average is .328; they have hit 56 home runs and 108 doubles, scoring 415 runs (seven per game) in their 69 games.

The pitching has been good, but not great. The team earned-run average is 4.15; opponents are hitting .257 against them.

The most consistent starter, however, is a freshman: Craig Benedict (from Plymouth Canton), who leads the Crusaders with a 6-2 record and is second on the team in ERA (2.42).

Others have had their moments, to be sure. Senior Louie McKaig started the season abysmally, losing his first four starts before rebounding. He has won five-straight decisions and has lowered his ERA to a respectable

4.43. He leads the team in strikeouts with 38 in 61 innings.

Ryan Grabetz, a junior, and T.C. Rapala, a senior, have both been solid. Grabetz is 4-2 with a 3.12 ERA; Rapala is 5-1 with a team-best 1.41 ERA.

George is counting on those four as his starters entering the tournament. Plenty of others will see action, however. Sean Henkel (Livonia Stevenson), a junior, should be the closer; he is 4-0 with a 3.18 ERA and a school-record six saves. Henkel also had the best strikeout ratio on the team, fanning 37 in 28 1/3 innings.

There's a lot of pop on the offense, as George indicated. Craig Overalls (Livonia Franklin), a senior, hit .337 with a team-high 50 runs batted in, and he tied Jim Solak for team leadership in home runs with 11. Solak (Bedford/Dearborn Divine Child) batted .387 with 13 doubles and 41 RBI.

Then there's junior Scott Anderson (.369, 16 doubles, seven triples, eight homers, 35 RBI, 29 of 31 bases stolen); seniors Jeff Miller (.394, five homers, 22 RBI), George Leung (.337) and Jeff Pendell, from Livonia Churchill (37, 36 RBI); and freshmen Dan Taylor (.376, 24 RBI) and Aaron Jones (.349, 30 RBI).

Stroh's Classic nears finale

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