

# Crusaders seek strong start to baseball season

BY RICHARD L. SHOOK  
SPECIAL WRITER

It has a team, a schedule and a temporary place to play. Now all Madonna University's baseball team needs is a field to practice on and a permanent home field.

Couch Greg Haeger starts his sixth season at the helm of the Crusaders' baseball team with plenty of hope that the two-year ball of red tape that has been wrapped around his planned new home baseball diamond will get untangled before it starts choking his program.

"We've met with the architects," Haeger said, "and the plans have been drawn up. Right now it's in the hands of the Pelecin Sisters, (Livonia) Ladywood and Madonna. We're fighting through the red tape."

Madonna will play its home games this season at Ford Field in Livonia, a suitable collegiate-level diamond and site of the summer Livonia Collegiate Baseball League. But the Crusaders can't practice at Ford Field and last fall were forced to use a softball diamond at Rotary Park.

"We still don't even have a field to practice on," Haeger said. "There are still a lot of questions to be answered."

"It's been difficult at times to keep the focus of the kids on playing ball. Not having a playing field and other things can't detract from what you're trying to do. That goes for the coaching staff, too."

"I know they're searching and trying. But they haven't come up with any solutions — and the season starts in just a few days."

Madonna's home field for the last few

## COLLEGE BASEBALL

years, Madonna Park, was located at the Bentley Center in Livonia. The city would not renew the lease and the field was torn down to make room for a new community center.

Plans are to build the new diamond on property where Madonna University and Ladywood HS are sited. Construction must begin soon, however, for the field to be available for next season — and to show recruits.

The Crusaders traveled to Miami Wednesday for the spring portion of their schedule and conditioning, with the first game scheduled for Friday. Madonna doesn't begin home play until mid-April.

Haeger has 25 players on his roster. He had about that number last year, too — for about a week, a key reason his team struggled to a 19-28 record overall, 11-13 in the Wolverine-Hoosier Athletic Conference.

"We lost more man-years to injury last year than my previous four combined," he said. "My shortstop (Neil Wildfong, from Canton) broke his thumb. We lost four starters down south. And no one really came back."

"Then we came back from Florida and lost another player with a hamstring injury. We were forced to play players out of position, asking them to do things some of them had never done before, in the summer or in high school. So it was pretty difficult."

"It was almost like spring training again after all those injuries. It was very

frustrating to everybody involved.

"Through all that, we still made it to our conference championship. That was the fifth year in row, I think, we had at least been to the conference championship game."

The Crusaders have just four seniors this season, two position players and two pitchers, and Haeger looks to them for leadership.

Joe Pruchnik (from Lutheran Westland; .380 batting average, three home runs, 15 runs batted in) will anchor the batting order and play first base while Wildfong (Plymouth Canton) returns to stabilize the infield at shortstop. Wildfong was a key player for the Crusaders as a junior.

At second base Haeger is looking to Redford Catholic Central product Mario D'Herin (Livonia; .278, one homer, 15 RBI), a junior whom he feels is a solid defensive player.

Third base is a contest between incumbent Roy Rabe (Livonia Stevenson; .271, two homers, 20 RBI), a junior, and 6-foot-6, 246-pound junior Sterling Mintzer, a transfer from Indiana University where he played football.

"Whichever one hits best, plays," Haeger said.

The catcher will be sophomore Matt Rigley (Redford Union; .227, two homers, 13 RBI) with freshman Scott Wakefield, the brother of Wayne coach Tom Wakefield, backing him up.

Redshirt freshman Brian Williams (Livonia; CC) returns to solidify the outfield from center field. Williams hit .167 in seven games before seeing his season ended by injury.

"He played a few games, tore his ham-

string and aggravated it when he tried to come back," Haeger said. "That was a monumental loss. After we lost him, we tried six, seven kids out there in center. It caused us a lot of problems."

In right the Crusaders will have Farmington junior Mark Cole (CC; .290, three homers, 14 RBI) while left field features another CC product from Livonia, junior Chris Woodruff (.312, three homers, 20 RBI).

Junior Devin Cole (Garden City; .353, two homers, 21 RBI) will back up the outfielders and also see action as one of Madonna's designated hitters. Cole was 17-for-20 in stolen bases last season.

Another outfield candidate is sophomore Eric Lightle (Livonia Churchill), who missed last season with injury and still is fighting a shin problem.

"We've got a lot of very good baseball players," Haeger said. "We have 11 kids who I feel can play very well and 18 kids total who can swing the bat. The others are going to push the kids who are playing because they want playing time. It's going to be a very competitive season for the position players."

The two seniors Haeger is counting on for big seasons are lefty Eric Williamson (White Lake, 1-2 won-loss record, 6.21 earned run average) and Jeremy Stevens (Romulus, 1-3 record, 5.96 ERA).

"Both had very good years as sophomores but both struggled as juniors," Haeger said. "They pitched more than 100 innings as sophomores but last year worked about 40 each. They both have worked very hard to regain their form of 2000. They've worked on their strength and throwing strikes."

Madonna's best pitcher again figures to be sophomore Joel Halliday (Redford Union, 4-4 record, 6.46 ERA). "He's got the best stuff of all our pitchers," Haeger said.

Farmington junior Mike Fisher (Lutheran Westland, 3.63 ERA in six games) "has developed much faster than we ever thought he was going to," Haeger said. "If he's healthy, he's going to be a key factor on the team."

"And Mike Hayes (Redford Union) and Corey Farnor (Taylor Kennedy) are going to be factors if either one can throw strikes on a consistent basis. Both throw hard and have good stuff."

Both of them sophomores, Hayes was 2-2 with a 6.40 ERA and two saves last season while Farnor was 1-3 with a 10.13 ERA.

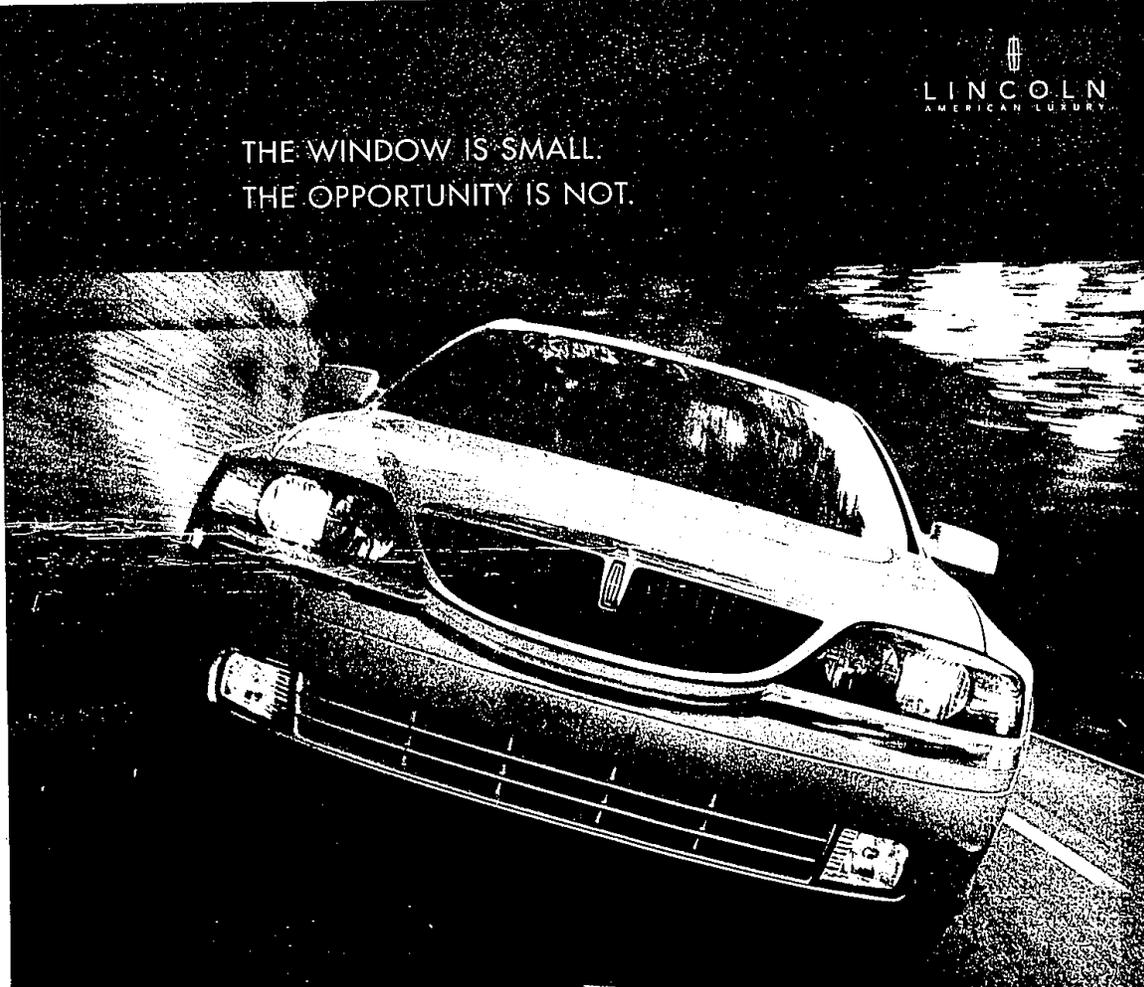
Haeger also plans to see what three of his position players can do on the mound. He hopes to get 30-50 innings from right-handers Devin Cole and Rabe plus southpaw Mark Cole.

If Madonna can get some stability and reliability on the mound, it could have an outstanding season. The Crusaders can definitely mash.

"A lot of people don't think we're going to be as good as we have been in years past," Haeger said. "I think we're going to surprise people. We've got 19 arms. We don't have that one great superstar; but not one is a really terrible pitcher. They've got pretty decent arms with good stuff."

"We're definitely going to score runs this year. We'll have a very potent offense team."

Now all the Crusaders need is a place to practice and play on a regular basis.



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