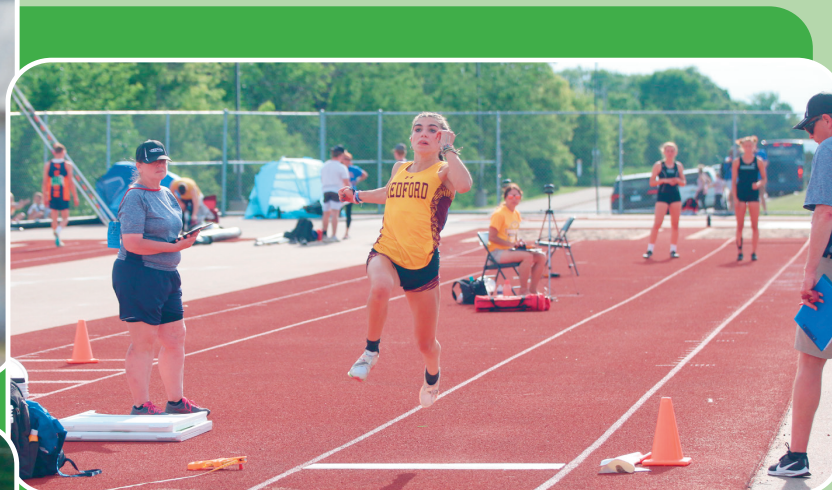


AWARD SPORTS PREVIEW

2023



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Steele Sports
JOHNNIE PHILLIPS

The Gopher Conference will be loaded with talent as the spring season kicks off, and for fans looking to watch all the action, you may want to get familiar with some of Steele County's premier athletes.

With the exception of Medford, each Steele County school in the Gopher Conference will have a baseball, softball, golf and track and field team competing for bragging rights and the possibility of bringing home some hardware.

In order to do so, each team will need some serious performances from the following athletes.

BASEBALL

Outside of NRHEG's dominant play and deep section run in 2022, last season was a difficult one for Steele County baseball squads.

Medford finished last season 4-9 overall while Blooming Prairie fared worse at 1-15.

If both teams are going to turn things around in 2023, they will need some strong performances from key returners.

For Blooming Prairie, utility player Jesse Cardenas will need to make his mark on a nightly basis on both offense and defense, while gaining help from teammates Alex Lea, Lucas Schammel, and Zack Hein.

For Medford, the key will be its senior leaders Tate Hermes and Josh Bluhm.

The two will be Medford's starting battery and will need to provide ample run support on offense as well, to propel the Tigers to a stronger 2023 season.

Meanwhile, NRHEG will be hoping to get back to its winning ways behind the dynamic trio of Andrew Phillips, Dexter Lee, and Jackson Chrz.

Phillips will patrol the outfield and provide speed and power out of the batter's box, while Lee and Chrz figure to be the team's one-two punch on the mound.

SOFTBALL

Hopes for Steele County's softball squads are high this year, and for

good reason.

Blooming Prairie and Medford bring back almost identical rosters to their 2022 teams, while NRHEG will also return most of its starters.

Blooming Prairie will need the bats to be working all spring and has the hitters to do so with Macy Lembke, Shawntee Snyder, Rachel Winzenburg, Layla Lembke, Lily Schammel, and Lexi Steckelberg all returning.

The five combined for a batting average of .341 last spring – couple that with the fact that senior pitcher Haven Carlson will return to the mound on a nightly basis, and Blooming Prairie figures to be a top squad in the Gopher Conference.

Medford will be in a similar situation with a near-identical lineup from the 2022 season.

The team will rely on senior leaders Josie Witter, Lydia Krenske, Josie Schell, Jenesis McGuire, and Grace Keller to make the difference in 2023.

As for NRHEG, the Panthers will rely on Sidney Schultz, Bree Ihrke, Faith Nielsen, Preslie Nielsen, and Hallie Schultz to lead

See **GOPHER** on 7 ►



STAFF PHOTO BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS

Annaka Forsberg



STAFF PHOTO BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS

Shawntee Snyder

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Only way is up for BP baseball



Blooming Prairie Baseball Schedule 2023

April 13	at Kenyon-Wanamingo	5 p.m.
April 14	at Hayfield	6 p.m.
April 17	vs. Mankato Loyola	4:30 p.m.
April 20	vs. Maple River	5 p.m.
April 21	vs. Spring Grove	4:30 p.m.
April 24	at Medford	5 p.m.
April 27	vs. NRHEG	5 p.m.
May 1	at Randolph	4:30 p.m.
May 2	vs. USC	4:30 p.m.
May 4	vs. Triton	5 p.m.
May 8	vs. GMLOK	4:30 p.m.
May 11	at USC	5 p.m.
May 13	at Austin Marcussen Park (Tourney)	10 a.m. & 4 p.m.
May 16	at Tri-City United	4:30 p.m.
May 18	at WEM	4:45 p.m.
May 19	vs. Medford	4:30 p.m.

BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS
SPORTS EDITOR

Last season was not kind to a young Blooming Prairie baseball team, but head coach Matt Kittelson expected the turbulent season and is entering

2023 prepared for his team to rebound.

The Awesome Blossoms did not have any seniors in 2022, and featured a roster primarily built by underclassmen in an already stacked conference.

“We took our lumps with no seniors and nobody with previous varsity experience. We finished with a 1-15 overall record and went 0-10 in the Gopher Conference and lost 6-0 in the first round of the Section 2AA tourna-

ment to Sibley East,” said Kittelson.

According to Kittelson, the big key for this season will be competing for all seven innings.

“Last year we would compete for a couple of innings, and then things

would fall apart. We need to have the resiliency and grit to battle for seven innings. We are looking to get better each and every day as individuals and as a team.”

However, this season’s team should have plenty

of experience to begin to put the pieces together.

This year’s roster will feature 17 total players, 10 of whom are returning letter-winners.

Equally as important as the spike in numbers

See **BP BASEBALL** on 8 ►



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Blossoms' veterans ready to show out



Blooming Prairie Softball
Schedule 2023

April 13	vs. Kenyon-Wanamingo	
All games at 4:30 p.m. except May 9 & 13		
April 17	at Kingsland	
April 18	vs. Cannon Falls	
April 20	at Maple River	
April 27	at NRHEG	
April 28	at Caswell Park Mankato (Tourney)	
April 29	at Caswell Park Mankato (Tourney)	
May 1	vs. Randolph	
May 4	at Triton	
May 8	at St. Clair	
May 9	vs. NRHEG	6 p.m.
May 11	vs. USC	
May 13	vs. Chatfield	11 a.m.
May 15	at FBA	
May 16	vs. Medford	
May 18	vs. WEM	

BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS
SPORTS EDITOR

Blooming Prairie softball's expectations for the 2023 season will undoubtedly be high as the team returns seven of nine starters after taking

third place last year in the Gopher Conference.

Thankfully for head coach Cam Rutledge, most of the team's key positions were not affected by graduation or injury – despite losing all-state athlete Bobbie Bruns and team-

mate Emily Anderson to graduation.

“We return seven starters from last year's 12-8 team. One of those returners is our senior pitcher Haven Carlson who was an all-conference selection a year ago. We

also return two other all-conference players in juniors Macy Lembke and Shawntee Snyder. This will be their third year as starters on the softball team. We expect to see many of our returners take a big leap this season

which will be a key to our team's success,” said Rutledge.

The outfield will be a key area for the team to address.

Lily Schammel slots in as the team's only returning outfield player;

however, the team also has six other athletes on the roster ready to fill open positions.

The Blossoms' offense will primarily run through the bats of returners Macy and Layla

See **BLOSSOMS** on 8 ►



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BP looking for a fast start in 2023

BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS
SPORTS EDITOR

Blooming Prairie's boys' and girls' track and

field teams will be looking for a fast start in 2023 after a 2022 season that saw the boys' team take second at the sub-section meet, and

Annaka Forsberg win a state title in the high jump for the girls' team. According to Blooming Prairie head coach Alli

Schmidt, the team has progressed well over the course of the spring practice schedule and should See **BP LOOKING** on 8 ►

Blooming Prairie Track & Field Schedule 2023			
April 14	at Triton	All meets at 4:30 p.m. except for May 13	
April 18	at Medford		
April 20	at Hayfield		
April 25	Home		
April 27	at GMLOKS		
May 4	at Medford		
May 13	at USC	10 a.m.	(Conference Meet)

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Hardecopf takes over as head coach

BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS
SPORTS EDITOR

Bloomington Prairie will have a new head coach this season when the team heads into its first match at Kenyon Country Club on Friday, April 14.

Leading the charge for the Awesome Blossoms will be Andrew Hardecopf, who took over head coaching duties after seven-year veteran Carl Peterson stepped down at the conclusion of last season.

Bloomington Prairie's boys team will feature a host of underclassmen athletes with eight of nine athletes being sophomores or younger.

The girls team will look similar to the boys age-

wise; however, it will only feature four athletes, comprised of two sophomores and two freshmen.

"We will have a pretty young team so the biggest goal for the year is to improve as the season goes on. Within the conference I do think we will be able to compete with most of the teams based on what other teams lost," said Hardecopf.

Both sides will benefit from the return of some key athletes looking to build their varsity experience and roles.

"On the boys' side of things, we have both Brady Johnson and Colby Johnson returning from the varsity team last year who should make a big jump

into the top of the team as far as scoring and consistent performance. On the girls team, all four of the girls on varsity are returning and most of them for their third years. Ella Farr was our most consistent scorer last year and hopefully, Caitlyn Stangle can push her for the tops on the team this year."

According to Hardecopf, another name to look out for is sophomore Braden Farr.

"Farr has the potential to be very good this year. He has gotten a lot stronger and has a good amount of distance to his game. If he can lock in on the short game, he could see his scores going down in a big way."



STAFF PHOTO BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS

Daxter Lee

Gopher Conference Athletes to Watch

◀ **GOPHER** from 3
the team back to another battle for the top of the Gopher Conference.

Schultz returns as a team co-MVP from the 2022 season.

TRACK AND FIELD

The story of the Gopher Conference track and field season a year ago was when Annaka Forsberg won the state high jump title as a sophomore with a winning height of five feet, six inches.

As she returns to the team as a junior in 2023, fans will be keen to see if she can surpass her impressive 2022 season and reach new heights in

her young career.

Medford's Jackie Cole will be another name to watch after an impressive showing at the state meet last year.

The junior took fourth place as a sophomore in the long jump and will return to the team as both a field athlete and a sprinter on the track team.

NRHEG's athletes to watch will be a trio of sprinters as Will Tuttle, Jaylin Raab, and Sawyer Prigge will look to put the opposition in the rearview mirror in 2023.

GOLF

The golf courses around town will be busy

all season long as Bloomington Prairie and NRHEG look to improve from their 2022 finishes.

According to first-year head coach Andrew Hardecopf, some names to watch for his boys' squad will be freshmen Brady and Colby Johnson, as well as girls golfer Ella Farr.

NRHEG head coach Brad Root said his team will lean on returning starters Grace Wilken-son, Laine Krohn, Tayla Sandry, and Ciara Stenzel for his girls' team, with Maverick Buel- tel, Nash Howe, Carter Schlaak, Shane Hansen, and Tyler Kress leading the boys' team.

Bloomington Prairie Boys' & Girls' Golf Schedule 2023

April 14	at Kenyon Country Club (Both)	4:30 p.m.
April 15	at Oaks Golf Club (Both)	10 a.m.
April 18	at Waseca Lakeside Country Club (Boys)	4 p.m.
April 20	at Oak View Golf Course (Both)	4:30 p.m.
April 22	at Bloomington Prairie Country Club (Boys)	10 a.m.
April 25	at Bloomington Prairie Country Club (Both)	4:30 p.m.
May 1	at Zumbrota Golf Club (Both)	10 a.m.
May 2	at Waseca Lakeside Country Club (Girls)	4 p.m.
May 4	at The Oaks Golf Course (Both)	4:30 p.m.
May 11	at Dodge Country Club (Both)	3 p.m.
May 15	at Waseca Lakeside Golf Course (Both)	10 a.m.
May 16	at Riverview Golf Course (Both)	TBD



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Only way is up for BP baseball

◀ **BP BASEBALL** from 4 is the fact that the team will have four seniors and four juniors to lead the way.

“We return everyone from last year’s team, so we will have an experienced group. Last season was a learning curve for many of our kids, and hopefully the valuable experience they gained will give them confidence that they can compete each game Gopher Conference is loaded with talent.”

The team already faced its first injury battle of the season, losing junior utility player Cale Braaten to a knee injury, but most every position on the diamond will look identical to last season.

Jesse Cardenas led the team on offense last season and returns to play both pitcher and shortstop; Alex Lea will be taking his usual spot at third base; Lucas Schammel will once again be the team’s power-hitting first baseman; and Zach Hein figures to be the team’s ace on the mound.

Also making his first appearance with the team after being a track athlete for the past two years will be Brady Kittelson. The freshman figures to play the outfield and pitch when called upon.

BP looking for a fast start in 2023

◀ **BP LOOKING** from 6 be ready to mix it up with its Gopher Conference opponents as the season kicks off.

“We graduated 10 seniors last year, but we are fortunate enough to have one of them, Xavier Rennie, return to help us coach this season. This season, we have 11 seniors who come with a lot of knowledge and experience from this track program. We are fortunate to have a healthy start to the season, and have no major injuries,” said Schmidt.

All eyes will surely be glued on Forsberg to repeat as a state champion in the high jump event after taking first place in 2022 with a height of five feet, six inches.

However, on a roster of 40 athletes with 37 returning letter-winners, fans can get excited about plenty of athletes this year.

“Gloria Hernandez advanced to sections as a seventh grader in the 3200-meter race and placed ninth overall. Sam Smith, Derek Kubicek, and Jacob Pauly are among some of the returning athletes who qualified for sections in the boy’s relays as well,” said Schmidt.

Blossoms’ veterans ready to show out

◀ **BLOSSOMS** from 5 Lembke, Snyder, Winzenburg, Steckelberg, and Schammel.

The five athletes combined for a cumulative batting average of .341, with Macy Lembke finishing last season with a staggering .471 average.

On the mound, Carlson will look to once again mow opponents down after finishing last season as Blooming Prairie’s ace.

The current senior finished her junior season with a 12-8 record, notching 92 strikeouts in 114 innings pitched and an earned-run-average of 4.72.

With all the pieces in place to make another run in the conference and into section play, Rutledge knows now is the time to strike for the Blossoms.

The team has 15 total athletes with six seniors, giving the team a strong edge in upperclassmen leadership.

“Our team will have a chance to compete for the conference championship this season,” Rutledge said. “Other teams I expect to be at the top of the conference include Randolph, USC, and Bethlehem Academy. Our section will feature many good teams.”

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Tigers looking for a fresh start

BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS
SPORTS EDITOR

The Medford Tigers had a trying spring in 2022, playing just 13 games due to weather and field conditions; however, the team is looking forward to a more exciting 2023 season.

Medford will return seven seniors on a team of 11 athletes, meaning no shortage of older, experienced talent when the team returns to the diamond.

“We have a great group of seniors coming back including Josh Bluhm, who we expect to have a great year on the mound and at shortstop. One of our team captains from last year, Tate Hermes, will also be our main leader on the field taking his spot behind the plate. Lastly, our second-team all-conference pitcher, Casey Chambers, will be a leader for our players. Although he is injured, he will be almost another coach for us,” said Medford head coach Joe Melles.

With 4-9 overall record in the 2022 season, the Tigers will look to regroup and fill some important roles after losing Chambers to injury and four seniors to graduation. Bluhm figures to take

on Chambers’ role as the Tigers main ace on the mound, while newcomer Logan Maas expects to use his speed to make a difference in the outfield and on the base paths.

“I told our guys we have two goals this season: have a lot of fun and maximize our potential. We expect to be competitive in our conference and hopefully win more games than last year,” said Melles.

Medford will be forced to stay healthy this season as the team will roster only 11 athletes.

Eight of those are returning letter-winners, with a complete team makeup of seven seniors, one junior, a sophomore, a freshman, and an eighth-grader.

Team captains to begin the season will be Hermes and Chambers.

According to Melles, the Gopher Conference will once again be stacked with talented teams; however, he is excited to see his team perform.

“Our conference has always been extremely competitive in baseball. There are some great 1A and 2A baseball teams in the conference that seem to make every game competitive.”

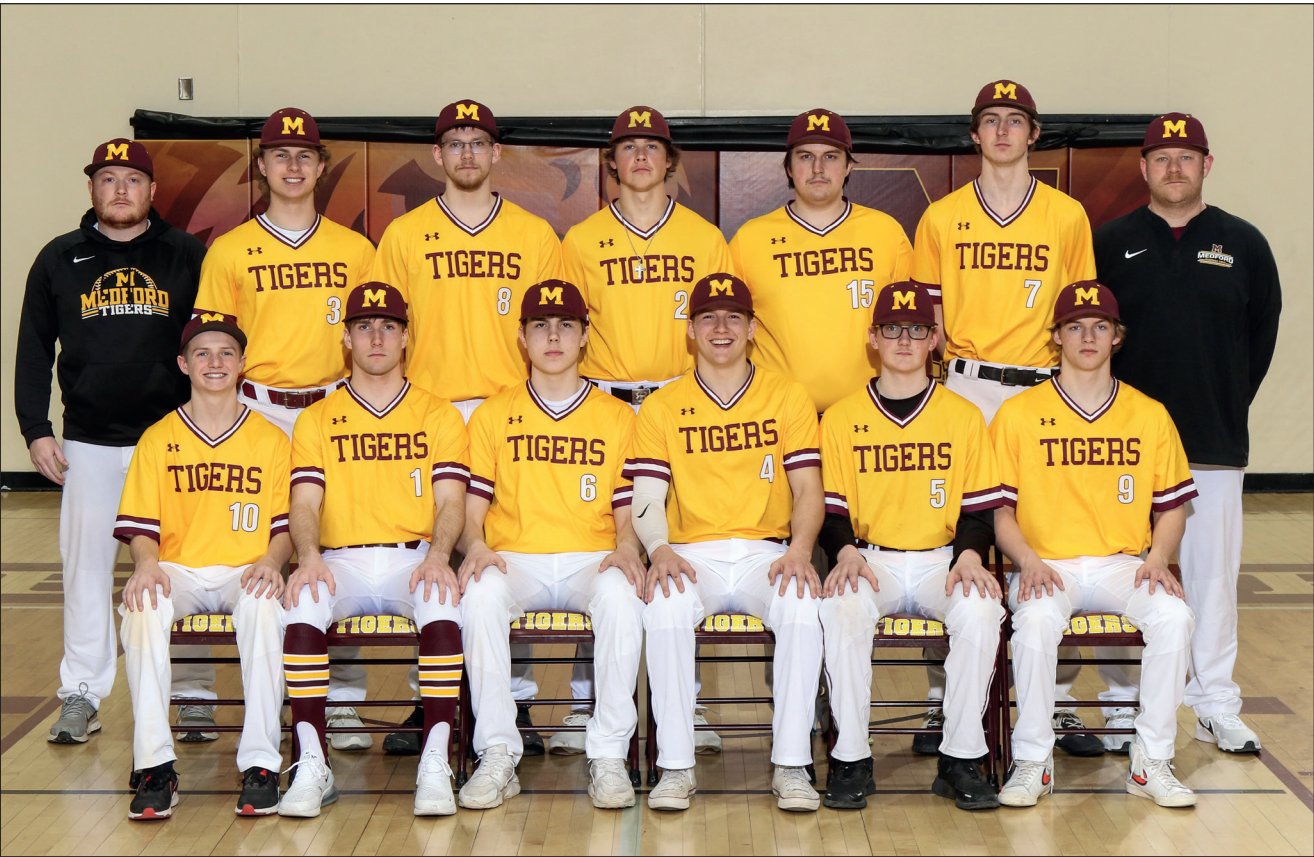


PHOTO COURTESY MIKE OLDENBURG

Medford Baseball Schedule 2023

April 13	vs. USC	5 p.m.	May 2	vs. Randolph	4:30 p.m.
April 17	at LCWM	4:30 p.m.	May 4	at Kenyon-Wanamingo	5 p.m.
April 21	at Goodhue	5 p.m.	May 8	at USC	4:30 p.m.
April 24	vs. Blooming Prairie	5 p.m.	May 11	vs. Maple River	5 p.m.
April 25	vs. Le Sueur-Henderson	5 p.m.	May 15	vs. WEM	4:30 p.m.
April 27	at Hayfield	4:30 p.m.	May 18	at NRHEG	4:30 p.m.
May 1	vs. JWP	5 p.m.	May 19	at Blooming Prairie	4:30 p.m.

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Softball

Coach Jeremy Moran returns most of the starting lineup, including the battery of junior Kennedy Hodgman who “took over the No. 1 pitching spot for the team last season,” and senior catcher Paiton Glynn, who “will continue to provide leadership for the team.” Senior Katelyn Bentz, a two-time All-Conference infielder, “has consistently been one of our best hitters.”

OHS returns infielder Izzy Radel, first baseman Samantha Bogen and utility player Zoie Rousch.

Baseball

These Huskies also bring back the majority of their lineup. Coach Tate Cummins says pitcher Teagun Ahrens



STAFF PHOTOS BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS

“will play a factor in the rotation or bullpen.” Ayden Walter is “[an] athletic shortstop that has a knack on the bases.” Catcher Drew Kretlow “caught more than half the games in 2022. He’s poised to be a cornerstone behind the plate.” Chris Homuth had the third-most innings pitched last season. All are seniors.

Junior Mitch Seykora was All-Conference and hit nearly 400 in 2022. Cummins says, “Mitch

will play an integral part in our lineup.” Others to watch for on the mound include Jonathan Clubb, Ethan Armstrong, and Michael Reinardy. While Briley Highfield, Carson Krenke and Tayte Berg will roam the outfield.

Boys Track

Coming off a Big Nine title and third-place finish at the state True Team meet, there’s plenty of anticipation ahead. Justin Gleason won the

state long jump title and could advance in triple jump and a relay, says coach Kevin Stelter. He’s also optimistic for Owen Korbel in high jump, Trevor Schirmer in shot and discus, Cole Piepho in pole vault, and Carter Johnson in the hurdle events.

Girls Golf

Longtime assistant Jason Kaytor is now the head coach. “We have our entire section team

back from last year with some younger players looking to make a move up.” Carmen Jirele went to state. Others are Mikayla Muhlman, Danika Taylor, Brooke Kunkel, Emily Schmidt, and Paige Thompson.

Boys Golf

The boys bring back some of their scoring leaders. Quinn Thompson “was our number one player last year and recorded the low scoring

average,” indicates coach Mark Langlois. Matthew Larson “played our number two spot...[He] gives it all on every shot.” Blake Burmeister enters his second year in the program, “He has made large gains in a short amount of time.”

Others back include Jack Langlois who advanced to the second day of sections and Mason Pelinka who appeared in many varsity matches as an eighth-grader.

See **OHS SPRING** on 15 ►

Tigers softball trending upward

BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS
SPORTS EDITOR

After finishing the 2022 season with a 1-16 record, Medford softball has only one way to go this season: up.

Despite their record, Medford came up just short on multiple occasions in games that could have easily swung the season in a different direction.

“Our record last year was 1-16, but we had about 10 games that were lost by one or two runs or in extra innings. This year, I would say that our team is right with all the other teams in our conference and those out of the conference as well,” said Medford head coach Sean Witter.

According to Witter, the team’s senior class of Josie Witter, Lydia Krenske, Josie Schell, Jenesis McGuire, and Grace Keller are all athletes for fans to watch this season as the Tigers look toward improving the program record.

The trio of Witter, Krenske, and Schell will take on roles at third base, shortstop, and first base, with McGuire and Keller tending to the outfield.

Taking the mound for the Tigers in 2023 will be the tandem of Mackenzie Velishek and Ava Clark. Both figure to split pitching duties while also contributing in the infield.

According to Melles, a new face Tigers fans should

watch for is freshman utility player Aleah Vogt.

“She puts lots of time into softball playing year-round, even while she is playing other sports. We are expecting to use her in many different situations,” said Witter.

Captaining the Tigers this season will be Josie Witter, Krenske, Keller, and Velishek.

While Witter noted that the goal for the season is to improve the team’s record and be competitive in the Gopher Conference, the reason for doing so is more than just to give fans more of a reason to cheer.

“We want to send our five seniors out on a winning note.”



PHOTO COURTESY MIKE OLDENBURG

Medford Softball Schedule 2023

April 13	at USC	All games at 4:30 p.m.
April 17	at Rochester Lourdes	
April 18	at Randolph	
April 20	vs. FBA	
April 21	vs. Waseca	
April 25	vs. Cannon Falls	
April 27	vs. Hayfield	
May 1	at JWP	
May 2	vs. USC	
May 4	vs. Kenyon-Wanamingo	
May 8	at Blue Earth Area	
May 9	at FBA	
May 11	at Maple River	
May 15	at WEM	
May 16	at Blooming Prairie	
May 18	vs. NRHEG	



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Medford returns a host of talent

BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS
SPORTS EDITOR

The Medford Tigers will enter the 2023 track and field season with a host of familiar faces looking to keep the team competitive in the Gopher Conference.

Both the boys and girls teams will bring back three section qualifiers, with the girls team also returning state competitor Jackie Cole to the roster.

Medford is coming off a strong 2022 season where both teams took second place in the Gopher Conference.

“Our varsity numbers are a little lower than in previous years. We will have a hard time filling a complete lineup. The good thing about track is that it isn’t all about the team. It’s an individual sport as well. I am excited to see how our individuals do this year. Our girls teams will be more complete than our boys. I am hoping we will compete for one of the top spots in the conference,” said Medford head coach Kevin Werk.

Leading the way for the girls will be Cole, who figures to be a utility



PHOTO COURTESY MIKE OLDENBURG

athlete in both track and field events.

She is coming off a fourth place finish in the long jump at the state meet a season ago and competes as a sprinter for the team.

According to Werk, athletes to keep an eye on alongside Cole will be Abby Fitzgerald in the discus, Reegan Sutherland in the shot put, and

sprinters Payton Ristau and Adalia List.

On the boys side, section qualifiers Cohen Stursa, Dylan Heider-shidt, and Jesse Ortiz will look to reach new heights in 2023.

Stursa will line up as a long-distance runner – most notably in the 800-meter race – while Heiderscheidt will handle

both the shot put and pole vault. Lopez will take over duties in the 200-meter race.

In total, Medford’s boys team will feature 27 athletes with seven returning letter-winners.

Meanwhile, the girls team will be able to rely on its depth with 39 total athletes and 12 returning letter-winners.

Medford Boys’/Girls’ Track & Field Schedule 2023

April 14 at Triton (Both)	4:30 p.m.
April 18 Home Meet (Both)	4:30 p.m.
April 27 at Byron (Both)	4 p.m.
May 4 Home Meet (Both)	4:30 p.m.
May 9 at Triton (Both)	1 p.m.
May 13 at USC (Both)	10 a.m.
May 16 at Pine Island (Both)	4 p.m.



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Huskies have lofty goals



BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS
SPORTS EDITOR

Owatonna’s baseball team is coming off a 10-12 overall season last year, but that hasn’t stopped the team from setting its sights on some lofty goals in 2023.

With a team full of experienced players and plenty of passionate athletes, this could be the year Owatonna breaks through on the diamond.

“Our goals are to be in the hunt for a Big Nine Conference championship and the hopes of earning a state berth in our section. The team is showing that they care for the game and are eager to work every day. We have a high-energy baseball club that will be playing a challenging non-conference schedule. The overall goal is to improve every day and play our best baseball at the end of the season,” said Owatonna head coach Tate Cummins.

Some familiar names that will once again be contributors for the

Huskies include pitchers Teagun Ahrens, Jonny Clubb and Chris Homuth, as well as shortstop Ayden Walter, catcher Drew Kretlow, and third baseman Mitch Seykora.

According to Cummins, the team will have a mix of both speed and power that could help Owatonna produce a steady amount of runs per game.

With a full arsenal of weapons returning on the mound as well, it’s easy to see why the Huskies have hopes for a solid regular season and a deep playoff run.

By the numbers, Owatonna will have 19 athletes on its roster with seven seniors, 11 juniors, and one sophomore.

The captains for the Huskies in 2023 will be Clubb, Kretlow, Seykora, and Walter.

According to Cummins, Owatonna’s biggest competitors will be Rochester Century, Mayo and Mankato West, all of whom he says have “top-end pitching.”

Owatonna Baseball Schedule 2023

April 13	vs. Rochester John Marshall	5 p.m.	May 5	at St. Cloud Putz Field	4:15 p.m.
April 18	at Faribault	5 p.m.		(Tourney)	
April 20	at Red Wing	5 p.m.	May 6	at St. Cloud Putz Field	10 a.m.
April 22	vs. Rochester Century	11 a.m.		(Tourney)	
	(Double Header)		May 9	at Rochester John Marshall	5 p.m.
April 25	at Winona	5 p.m.	May 11	vs. Northfield	4 p.m.
April 27	vs. Mankato West	5 p.m.		(Double Header)	
May 2	at Rochester Mayo	4 p.m.	May 18	at Mankato West	5:30 p.m.
	(Double Header)		May 22	at Park HS	5 p.m.
May 4	vs. Mankato East	5 p.m.	May 23	vs. Albert Lea	5 p.m.



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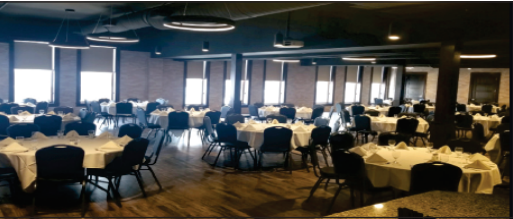
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Huskies softball stacked with talent

BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS
SPORTS EDITOR

Owatonna softball head coach Jeremy Moran was not shy to speak about his confidence in the team this spring, saying that this year’s squad is chock-full of talent and experience.

After looking at the numbers, it’s easy to see the source of his confidence.

Owatonna will have a small roster of just 11 athletes, however, all 11 return as letter-winners with almost every key position.

“This is the deepest, most experienced lineup I have coached here in Owatonna. The entire lineup, whoever it may be for any given day, has the ability to make a big impact for us. It is a lineup where the standout player could be someone different in each game,” said Moran.

Preparing to step back onto the field as returning all-conference players are Kaetlyn Bentz, Izzy Radel, and Zoie Roush.

Bentz made her mark in the infield and on the mound last season, provid-

ing a powerful bat in the Huskies lineup.

Radel and Roush earned high praise from Moran as consistent hitters who can take on utility roles in the field and produce game-changing plays on both offense and defense.

In the circle, Owatonna will be glad to have its ace, Kennedy Hodgman, back for the 2023 season.

“She had a strong season last year – her first at the varsity level – and has put in a lot of work in the offseason to be even stronger this year,” said Moran.

With such a dynamic roster, expectations are high for Moran and the team.

“We have high expectations for this season. With the experience and the talent we have returning, we expect to be one of the teams in the hunt for the conference title and also be one of the top teams in the section.”

Owatonna will look to improve on its 13-10 overall and 7-4 conference record in 2022 that earned the team a sixth-place finish in the Big Nine Conference.



Owatonna Softball Schedule 2023

April 13	at Rochester John Marshall	5 p.m.	May 4	at Mankato East	5 p.m.
April 15	at Rochester Century (Double Header)	11 a.m.	May 6	at Northview Park Athletic Fields (Tourney)	2 p.m.
April 18	vs. Faribault	5 p.m.	May 9	vs. Rochester John Marshall	5 p.m.
April 20	vs. Red Wing	5 p.m.	May 11	at Northfield (Double Header)	4 p.m.
April 25	vs. Winona	5 p.m.	May 13	at Albert Lea	1 p.m.
April 27	at Mankato West	5 p.m.	May 15	vs. Kasson-Mantorville	5 p.m.
May 2	vs. Rochester Mayo (Double Header)	4 p.m.	May 18	vs. Mankato West	5 p.m.

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OHS Spring Sports “Athletes to Watch”

◀ OHS SPRING from 10

Boys Tennis

Seniors are likely to contribute heavily this season. Mac Pilcher played number-one singles. Nils Gantert and Charlie Tucker were at the top doubles spot. Aiden Engel will miss half the season recovering from knee surgery. “All had terrific seasons,” says coach Curt Matejcek.

Boys Lacrosse

The Huskies lost their top scorer and goalkeeper, but coach Scott Seykora likes the returning corps. Captains Caleb Hullop-eter, Jack Strom, Porter Kuchenbecker, and Beckett Seykora lead the offense. Brandon Schulz (midfield), Joe Webster (attack), and Mark Spurgeon (defense) should all contribute.

Girls Track

Owatonna’s girls’ track team has about 90 athletes. Coach Debby Gleason is excited with the depth, “which will make us competitive from a team standpoint.” Captain Lauren Waypa and Laken Meier ran the 4-by-100 at state last year. “We are looking for their leadership in the sprint events.” Kaitlyn Wasieleski is a throwing captain “and has done a lot of work off season to prepare herself.” There’s a solid group of

young throwers for her to guide. Kiara Gentz captains the distance runners that include state cross country qualifier Carsyn Brady. The two

will “be a crucial part of our success.”

Girls Lacrosse

The Huskies bring back

two of their top three scorers. Anni Moran led the squad with 54 goals and added 10 assists. Madison McGinn scored 31 goals with 11 helpers.



STAFF PHOTO BY JACOB SEYKORA



STAFF PHOTOS BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS

Huskies boys ready to defend section title

BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS
SPORTS EDITOR

With the Owatonna boys coming off both a Big Nine and section conference title season, as well as a third-place team finish at the state meet, the expectations are for the Huskies to dominate in track and field again this year.

Add to that the girls' team featuring 90 athletes, with 29 returning letter-winners, and it could be a special season for both squads.

"While we lost some very good athletes to graduation, we return a number of key individuals and feel we have some strong underclassmen who will be able to fill empty spots. The big

thing is that we feel we can cover all of our field events with high-quality athletes. Athletes with a lot of experience at this level," said Owatonna boys head coach Kevin Stelter.

Despite losing state qualifiers Ryan Gregory, Tanner Stendel, Eli Spurgeon, Connor Ginskey, and Noah Kubicek, the Huskies will still return state champion long jumper Justin Gleason, 4x800-relay athletes David Smith and Jacob Ginskey, and state hopeful thrower Trevor Schirmer.

Captaining the 2023 team will be Gleason, Schirmer, Smith and high See **HUSKIES** on 17 ►



PHOTO COURTESY MIKE OLDENBURG



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Huskies boys ready to defend section title

◀ **HUSKIES** from 16 jumper Owen Korbøl.

As for the girls' team, the Huskies figure to be strong with a collective of all-conference athletes and state participants returning.

According to Owatonna girls head coach Debby Gleason, fans will have to keep their eyes out for athletes Carsyn Brady, Lauren Waypa, Kaitlyn Wasieleski, and Kiara Gentz.

Brady and Gentz will help lead the team in distance events, Waypa figures to captain the sprinters, and Wasieleski will captain the team in throwing events.

Waypa and teammate Laken Meier will be the sole returning state participants after competing in the 4x100-relay event last season.

"We are really looking to have an outstanding season. We have really

developed a good depth and balance in all our events which will help our overall team results this season. I anticipate our athletes qualifying for the state meet in multiple events this spring," said Gleason.

Owatonna will have no shortage of athletes to compete this season as the two teams combine for 183 athletes, with the boys' team rostering 93 to the girls' 90.

Owatonna Boys'/Girls' Track & Field Schedule 2023

April 14	at Irondale (Both)	4:15 p.m.	May 2	at Winona Paul	4:30 p.m.
April 21	at Stillwater Area (Boys)	3:30 p.m.	May 4	at Rochester Mayo (Both)	4 p.m.
April 21	at Austin Wescott Sports Complex (Girls)	4:30 p.m.	May 9	at Lakeville South (Both)	1:30 p.m.
April 25	at Albert Lea Jim Gustafson Field (Both)	4:30 p.m.	May 11	Home Meet (Both)	4:30 p.m.
April 27	at Lakeville South (Boys)	4 p.m.	May 18	at Red Wing (Both)	4:30 p.m.
April 28	at Hamline University (Both)	5 p.m.	May 25	at Winona Paul Giel Field (Big Nine)	10:30 a.m.

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Huskies ready to avenge Big Nine title loss

BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS
SPORTS EDITOR

Owatonna's girls' lacrosse team is set to avenge its 2022 Big Nine

Conference title this season after falling just short in second place last season. According to Huskies' head coach Dani Licht, the

8-6 overall record from last year did not sit well with the team, and the girls have hopes of improving when the season kicks off.

"After losing the Big Nine title this last season, our team has put winning the conference at the top of their team goals for this season. As a coach this is

definitely something they have the opportunity to do if they continue to have a team-first attitude. One of my favorite things about this group of girls is that

they want each other to succeed, and I believe that is what is going to continue to propel this team forward," said Licht. See **BIG NINE** on 20 ►



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Huskies have serious scoring potential

BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS
SPORTS EDITOR

The Owatonna Huskies lost some key pieces

to graduation this past season with the like of Preston Meier (top scorer) and Korbin Sticklin (four-year starting goalie)

leaving the team. However, the Huskies will not be short in roster numbers and bring back some serious

firepower on offense. “We return four of the top six goal scorers from last year. Junior Jack Strom had 22 goals, soph-

omore Michael Heitkamp had 16, senior Beckett Seykora had 12 and junior Caleb Hullopetter scored 10. Defensively, junior

Mark Spurgeon and sophomores Lane Karsten and Nolan Soller will lead us,” said Owatonna head See **HUSKIES** on 20 ►

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Huskies have serious scoring potential

◀ **HUSKIES** from 19 coach Scott Seykora.

The Huskies had a trying 2022 season finishing 4-10 overall with a 2-6 conference record; however, the team nearly pulled off a major upset in the opening round of section play, falling to Northfield 11-10.

“We are looking to improve on our record from last year and look to be one of the top teams

in the Big Nine. We have strength in our defensive and attack positions with some really good players on midfield as well. We have a tough schedule set for the 2023 season and look to compete.”

Wearing the captain’s “C” this season will be Strom, Seykora, Hullopeter, and Porter Kuchenbecker.

Numbers are once again up for the Huskies in 2023, with the team rostering 49 total athletes.

Equally as important is the team’s depth; 16 letter-winners are returning – enough to have a full-fledged lineup of experienced players.

“I feel that we will be in competition for the Big Nine title this year with Mankato, Rochester Mayo, and Northfield all being in competition as well. Farmington and the two Lakeville schools are always tough in our section.”

Up first for the Huskies is a road matchup against Rochester Mayo on Monday, April 17 at 7:30 p.m.

According to Seykora, the game will be a good measuring stick for how the team shapes up after spring practices conclude.

Owatonna Girls Lacrosse Schedule 2023

- April 17 vs. Rochester Mayo 7:15 p.m.
- April 20 at Rochester John Marshall 7:15 p.m.
- April 22 vs. Lakeville South 2 p.m.
- April 25 vs. Mankato 7:15 p.m.
- April 27 vs. Northfield 7:15 p.m.
- May 1 at Rochester Century 7:15 p.m.
- May 3 at Rochester Mayo 7:15 p.m.
- May 8 vs. Rochester John Marshall 7:15 p.m.
- May 11 at Mankato 5:45 p.m.
- May 15 at Northfield 7:15 p.m.
- May 18 vs. Rochester Century 7:15 p.m.
- May 19 at Duluth East 6:30 p.m.
- May 25 at Lakeville North 5:30 p.m.

Owatonna Boys’ Lacrosse Schedule 2023

April 17	at Rochester Mayo	7:30 p.m.	May 9	at New Prague	6:30 p.m.
April 20	vs. Academy of Holy Angels	7:30 p.m.	May 11	at Mankato	6 p.m.
April 24	vs. Farmington	7:30 p.m.	May 13	at Lakeville South	12 p.m.
April 27	at Northfield	7:30 p.m.	May 15	vs. Northfield	7:30 p.m.
May 1	vs. Rochester Century	7:30 p.m.	May 19	at Rochester Century	7:30 p.m.
May 4	vs. Rochester Mayo	7:30 p.m.	May 23	vs. Mankato	7:30 p.m.
			May 25	at Simley	7 p.m.

Huskies ready to avenge Big Nine title loss

◀ **BIG NINE** from 18 Similar to the boys’ team, Owatonna’s girls’ squad lost some key seniors to graduation in starting goalie Zoe Anderson, defender Anna Mollenhauer, and attacker Audrey Simon, but still managed to keep a loaded roster.

Spearheading the Owatonna attack will be returning star Annika Moran, who has been a consistent force for the Huskies over the course of her career at Owatonna.

“Annika is a huge key player for us as a senior captain. Last season she

was awarded second-team all-section, first-team all-conference, and has tallied the most career goals by any Husky girls player in Owatonna history. She also ranked in the top 10 scorers in the state all season long and has signed to play Division II lacrosse at Quincy University.”

Joining Moran as captains will be seniors Ava Eitrheim and Ella Hayes, along with junior captain Madison McGinn.

Eitrheim will captain the defense with Hayes taking control in the mid-field and McGinn joining Moran on attack.

Goalie responsibilities will likely be split between freshmen Ella and Nora Marshall.

Owatonna’s first game of the season will come at home against Rochester Mayo on Monday, April 17.

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Panthers back on the hunt

BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS
SPORTS EDITOR

After finishing fourth in the Section 2AA playoffs last season, NRHEG is prepped to make another deep run this season with a loaded roster.

Highlighting the team will be the trio of outfielder Andrew Phillips, utility player Daxter Lee, and pitcher Jackson Chrz.

“We’re looking to contend for a top-three finish in the Gopher Conference, and hope to host a home playoff game again this season and finish in the top-three in the section,” said NRHEG head coach Mark Lee.

Lee’s lofty goals for his squad seem well within reach for the Panthers in 2023, despite seeing another drop in roster numbers this season.

With 21 players on the depth chart for this season, just six will be returning letter-winners; however, each brings a key skill to the table.

Phillips – a top-10 state recruit and South Dakota State University commit – will patrol the outfield with varsity regulars Sam Olson and Ethan Thompson. Meanwhile Lee, Chrz, and Alden Doberstein will take over infield duties, while rotating on the mound.

Thompson also led the Panthers in batting average a season ago, while Lee’s earned-run-average of .878 was a team-best.

NRHEG will have to be on top of its game to surpass its 12-5 overall and 8-3 in-conference record, especially in a Gopher Conference stacked with talented teams.

“We have a chance to be towards the top of our conference and section, but the Gopher Conference is looking very tough with defending state champs and runner ups in class A still ranked No. 1 and No. 2 in the preseason rankings. So we will see where we land after playing them.”



COURTESY ELI LUTGENS-STAR EAGLE

NRHEG Baseball Schedule 2023

April 15	vs. Martin Luther-GHEC	12 p.m.	May 5	vs. Pine Island 7	p.m.
April 17	at Randolph	4:30 p.m.	May 9	vs. Triton	4:30 p.m.
April 18	at Tri-City United	5 p.m.	May 11	vs. Kenyon-Wanamingo	4:30 p.m.
April 20	at USC	4:30 p.m.	May 12	vs. USC	4:30 p.m.
April 25	vs. WEM 4:30 p.m.		May 15	at Maple River	4:30 p.m.
April 27	at Blooming Prairie	5 p.m.	May 16	at Albert Lea	5 p.m.
May 1	vs. Hayfield	4:30 p.m.	May 18	vs. Medford	4:30 p.m.
May 4	at JWP	4:30 p.m.			

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Panthers golf has strength in numbers

BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS
SPORTS EDITOR

The NRHEG Panthers boys and girls golf teams had a middling year in 2022, but after losing just one senior to graduation last year, the team is primed for an even bigger 2023.

Kaylee Kruger was the Panthers' lone athlete to move on from the team, meaning the team's roster won't have much turnover and will once again gain more varsity experience.

"We had a good showing at the conference tournament and sub-sections. We hope we have some all-conference honors and advance to the section tournament. The girls need to be mentally tough and focused this year. We are counting on continued improvement in all our girls. For the boys, we had a good season last year and got some good experience. We are pretty well set on our five varsity spots. We will again have small numbers, so someone may emerge as a surprise to help us," said head coach Brad Root.

Returning for the girls team will be Grace Wilken-son, Lainee Krohn, Tayla Sandry, and Ciara Stenzel.

On the boys team, Maver-erik Bueltel, Nash Howe, Carter Schlaak, Shan Hansen, and Tyler Kress figure to make up the Pan-thers' starting five.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The girls squad finished last year 8-5 overall and took third place in conference, eventually finishing ninth in sub-section match play.

NRHEG's boys squad had a more difficult time earning wins and finished 8-15 overall, taking sixth place in conference play and 12th in the sub-section tournament.

According to Root, the objectives for 2023 will remain simple: practice, prepare and execute.

"Course management is a huge part of the game as well as becoming strong mentally. We need to move from being practice players to tournament players. Making sure they are prepared for whatever weather conditions exist,

as well as dealing with situations on the course will be a priority. We would like to advance our team to sections and get an all-conference selection or two this year. We have small numbers of golfers and all of them will play varsity. We want them to learn the game so they can enjoy it throughout their life."

NRHEG Boys' & Girls' Golf Schedule 2023

April 13	at Riverview Golf Course (Both)	4:30 p.m.
April 20	at Prairie Ridge Golf Course (Both)	4:30 p.m.
April 25	at Dodge Country Club (Both)	4:30 p.m.
May 4	at The Oaks Golf Course (Both)	4:30 p.m.
May 11	at Kenyon Country Club (Girls)	4:30 p.m.
May 12	at Kenyon Country Club (Boys)	4:30 p.m.
May 15	at Waseca Lakeside Golf Course	10 a.m.
(Conference Meet)		



COURTESY ELI LUTGENS- STAR EAGLE



COURTESY ELI LUTGENS- STAR EAGLE

Young Panthers team on the rise

BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS
SPORTS EDITOR

The Panthers will enter 2023 with a relatively young boys and girls track and field team; however, they are not short of experience at the varsity level. NRHEG's girls team will be led by the trio of Evelyn Nydegger, Quinn VanMaldeghem, and Anika Ladlie, none of them seniors. Nydegger will lead from the front as a junior and compete in the hurdles and mid-distance races, according to head coach Duey

Ferber. VanMaldeghem returns for her freshman season as a state qualifier and NRHEG's school record holder in the 800-meter race and 4x800 relay. Ladlie figures to make her presence felt in the field as a high jumper for the Panthers. NRHEG's girls squad tied with Medford for second place in the conference last season, and according to Ferber, "the Gopher Conference is wide open this year." Hurdles and jumps in the field appear to be

where NRHEG's strengths will lie; however, depth is the primary cause for concern at the moment. "We need to have more than one athlete score in each event," said Ferber. The Panthers girls team only returns two seniors in Olivia Kofstad and Josie Strom, meaning that the team will have to rely on younger talent to gain experience fast and produce results. Meanwhile, on the boys team, NRHEG will have more senior leadership with nine total athletes

and four returning letter-winners. Senior Sawyer Prigger and juniors William Tuttle and Jaylin Raab will look to be the Panthers' main sprinters, with freshmen distance runners Jacob Karl and Devon Nelton looking to make their presence felt in the mid-to-long-distance races. The Panthers' boys team will look to get back to their winning ways and take a shot at the Gopher Conference title after winning it back-to-back years in 2018 and 2019.

"We have some good athletes in most areas. We should be strong in our sprints and sprint relays. Our long-distance squad has some good younger athletes as well as some upperclassmen. We also

have seven boy throwers who have a lot of potential this season. Our jumps also have some returners who will look to score some points. We have most of our bases covered," said Ferber.

NRHEG Boys'/Girls' Track & Field Schedule 2023

April 25	at Blooming Prairie (Both)	4:30 p.m.
May 4	Home Meet (Both)	4:30 p.m.
May 13	at USC (Conference Meet)	10 a.m.



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NRHEG softball adapting after key losses

BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS
SPORTS EDITOR

The Panthers softball team will look to be competitive in 2023, despite losing some key pieces from their 2022 team that finished 15-7 overall and 9-2 in conference play.

NRHEG will be without first-team all-conference athletes Sophie Stork and Ava Kylo, both of whom won multiple team awards for their contributions.

Stork was the 2022 co-MVP with current senior Sidney Schultz and handled the bulk of NRHEG's pitching duties while adding a powerful bat to the lineup.

Kylo will be missed both as a fielder and a reliable bat, as the Panthers' grad won both the team Golden Glove and Golden Bat awards for play.

While both Stork and

Kylo will leave massive holes in their wake after graduation, NRHEG head coach Wendy Schultz is confident she has a roster capable of remaining competitive this season.

"We'll have players moving to positions they haven't played as much previously, but we hope to get better and improve throughout the entire season and be playing our best ball at playoff time. We have some hard workers with great attitudes and plenty of speed," said Schultz.

Returning for NRHEG will be Sidney Schultz, Bree Ihrke, Faith Nielsen, Preslie Nielsen, and Hallie Schultz.

Sidney Schultz will likely take up her position behind the plate, while Hallie Schultz will play second base after rehabbing a shoulder injury all last spring.

Faith and Preslie Nielsen will handle the corners of the infield, playing at third and first base, while Ihrke figures to be a utility player capable of moving around the field as needed.

Captaining the squad will be both Sidney and Hallie Schultz, along with Ihrke.

According to Schultz, the Gopher Conference will be uber-competitive.

"Randolph went to state last year and return most of their team. FBA and BP tied for third in the conference last year and return many key players. Hayfield and WEM always have fundamentally sound teams, and USC has their returning pitcher who is pretty dominant."

Upperclassmen leadership will be plentiful for the Panthers, with three seniors and eight juniors among 14 total athletes.



COURTESY ELI LUTGENS- STAR EAGLE

NRHEG Softball Schedule 2023

April 14	at Triton	4:30 p.m.	May 5	at Caswell Park	TBD
April 17	vs. Martin Luther-GHEC	4:30 p.m.	May 6	at Caswell Park	TBD
April 18	vs. Blue Earth Area	4:30 p.m.	May 9	at Blooming Prairie	6 p.m.
April 20	vs. USC	4:30 p.m.	May 11	at Kenyon-Wanamingo	4:30 p.m.
April 21	at Tri-City United	4 p.m.	May 12	vs. Austin	4:30 p.m.
April 24	at FBA	4:30 p.m.	May 15	vs. Maple River	4:30 p.m.
April 25	at WEM	4:30 p.m.	May 18	at Medford	4:30 p.m.
April 27	vs. Blooming Prairie	4:30 p.m.	May 19	vs. Southland	4:30 p.m.
May 1	at Hayfield	4:30 p.m.			
May 4	vs. JWP	4:30 p.m.			



Hours
M-F 8 am - 5 pm
Sat 8 am - 1 pm

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