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GLIAC Softball Coaches Pick GVSU for 2004 Conference Title

Lakers Return Seven Starters, Including All-American Mackson, to Defend GLIAC Crown

BAY CITY, Mich. -- The head softball coaches of the Great Lakes Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (GLIAC) chose Grand Valley State University to win the league's 2004 championship in preseason balloting.

Grand Valley State University, last season's conference champion, earned seven of 11 possible first-place votes and 106 total points. Wayne State University, the defending Great Lakes Region champion, received three first-place votes and tallied 90 points to finish second in the poll.

Ashland University finished third in the poll with 86 points and one first-place nod. Gannon University placed fourth in the poll with 69 points.

A total of eight points separated fifth place from eighth place in the preseason rankings. The University of Findlay was fifth after totaling 52 points, followed closely by Ferris State University (50 points), Saginaw Valley State University (47), and Hillsdale College (45).

Northwood University tallied 39 points for ninth place. Mercyhurst College, with 15 points, and Lake Superior State University, with 14 points, round out the poll.

Each of the GLIAC's 11 coaches ranked each of the GLIAC teams, but were not allowed to rank their own squad. The first-place team on each ballot received ten points, while the second-place team received nine points, etc.

The GLIAC was well represented in the NCAA Division II Great Lakes Region tournament last season, as Ashland, Grand Valley State, and Wayne State advanced to post season play. Wayne State claimed the regional title, defeating GVSU in the championship game and earning a trip to the NCAA Division II Softball Championship in Salem, Va.

The 2004 GLIAC softball tournament will be held in Sault Ste. Marie, Mich. Lake Superior State University will host the two-day double-elimination tournament on Apr. 30 and May 1.

GLIAC softball teams open the 2004 conference season on Friday, Apr. 2.

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2004 GLIAC Preseason Softball Coaches Poll

Rank	School (first-place votes)	Points
1.	Grand Valley State (7)	106
2.	Wayne State (3)	90
3.	Ashland (1)	86
4.	Gannon	69
5.	Findlay	52
6.	Ferris State	50
7.	Saginaw Valley State	47
8.	Hillsdale	45
9.	Northwood	39
10.	Mercyhurst	15
11.	Lake Superior State	14

2003 GLIAC Softball Final Standings*

Place	School	Record (GLIAC)
1.	Grand Valley State	49-6 (17-1)
2.	Ashland	40-18 (12-6)
3.	Gannon	28-21 (6-7)
4.	Wayne State	39-15-1 (15-3)
5.	Findlay	16-24 (7-7)
6.	Saginaw Valley State	21-21 (7-9)
7.	Northwood	17-27 (6-10)
8.	Hillsdale	18-17 (7-11)
9.	Lake Superior State	5-44 (4-12)
10.	Ferris State	18-29-1 (6-10)
11.	Mercyhurst	9-34-1 (2-13)

* - GLIAC Softball final standings are based on the average of regular season and tournament finishes.

The following are season previews on each of the GLIAC's 11 Softball Teams:

Ashland University: The Eagles bring back a strong nucleus of talent that produced a 40-18 record and a second consecutive trip to the NCAA regional tournament a season ago. Senior Josie Nelson will once again be the ace of the staff as she set the program's career record in strikeouts (960) and earned run average (0.96) and is on pace to break nine other pitching records. She led all NCAA Division II pitchers in strikeouts per seven innings. Nelson was a third team All-America and first team All-GLIAC and All-Great Lakes Regional selection a year ago. She also returns as one of the Eagles' top hitters, batting .335 with three home runs and 29 runs knocked in.

Offensively – the Eagles return five of their top hitters from last season with junior catcher Mandy Sansbury leading the way. Sansbury was a second team All-GLIAC selection after hitting .343 with seven home runs, 15 doubles and 36 runs batted in. Sara Mathes was a first team All-GLIAC pick after she batted .310 with two home runs, 18 doubles and 33 RBI. She set AU's single-season record for doubles. Head coach Sheilah Gulas is in her eighth season at Ashland and holds a 275-108 record. Last season, she became the program's all-time winningest coach. She has led the Eagles to five regional tournament appearances and needs 19 wins to reach the 500-win milestone.

Ferris State University: The most significant news entering the 2004 campaign for FSU is the return of head coach Keri Becker, the 2003 GLIAC Coach of the Year. Becker, who's the school's all-time winningest coach with a six-year 201-125 coaching mark, missed the 2003 season due to active armed forces duty. She will take charge of a Bulldogs squad which compiled an 18-29-1 overall record a season ago. Ferris State welcomes back 11 letterwinners from last season's team and will be led by a pair of seniors in first baseman Nicki Merchant (.286, 42 hits, nine doubles, 9 HR, 26 RBI) and senior third baseman Dana Conklin (.262, 34 hits, 8 doubles, 1 HR, 20 RBI).

University of Findlay: The Oilers finished the 2003 season with an overall record of 16-24, 7-7 in the GLIAC. UF placed fourth in the GLIAC Tournament and are looking to improve on that finish this season. Second-year head coach Ron Ammons graduated four key seniors last season including four-year starters, Brooke Bower and Stacey Sharp. Key returners will be All-GLIAC first-team centerfielder Robin Altenburger, first baseman Kristen Beatty, catcher/DP Kari Myers, pitcher Ashlee Donahoo, and third baseman Heather Post. Six returning underclassmen also lettered last season and are headlined by GLIAC honorable mention infielder Brandy Bower. With the addition of a solid recruiting class, Ammons' squad hopes to move into the GLIAC elite.

Grand Valley State University: Grand Valley State captured both the GLIAC regular season and tournament titles en route to a 49-6 overall record last season. The Lakers will look to defend their titles and advance in the post-season with two-time NFCA All-American senior pitcher Jennifer Mackson. In 222.1 innings, Mackson (28-4, 0.60 ERA) allowed only 105 hits and 19 earned runs, while recording 302 strikeouts. NFCA All-Region selections Sara Vroegindewey and Jen Goldschmeding will lead the way on the offensive attack. Vroegindewey batted .325 last season, recording 34 RBI, 10 doubles, and led the GLIAC with five triples. Goldschmeding batted .316, tallying 56 hits, 14 doubles, and 35 RBI. Head Coach Doug Woods has compiled a 514-218-3 record in 14 seasons at the helm of the Lakers.

Gannon University: Gannon looks to continue its success under fourth-year head coach Beth Pierce in 2004. The Lady Knights posted a 28-21 record last season and advanced to the GLIAC Tournament finals for the second consecutive season. Pierce has compiled an impressive 98-48-1 record during her first three seasons.

Charity Sharp (Hillard, Ohio/Hillard Darby) is Gannon's top returning hitter. The sophomore hit .306 in 37 games as a freshman last season. Allison Gerger (Corapolis, Pa./Montour) will once again provide Gannon with its power after hitting .278 with eight home runs and 29 RBI as a freshman in 2003. Heather Ford (Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island) will conclude her collegiate career in 2004. The senior has been named to several All-GLIAC and All-Region teams during her three-year career. She went 14-11 with a 1.78 earned run average and 226 strikeouts last season.

Hillsdale College: The Hillsdale College softball team returns 11 letterwinners from last year's team that finished 18-17 overall with a 7-11 mark in the GLIAC. Pitching will be a key factor for sixth-year head coach Jay Jondro as the Chargers return senior Joelle Frantz to the lineup after she missed most of the 2003 season with an injury. Before her injury, Frantz had posted a 5-2 overall record with a 1.75 ERA and 38 strikeouts. She will be teamed with sophomore Lindsey McNaughton, who led the Chargers with seven victories (7-5 overall) and a 1.67 ERA as a freshman.

Offensively, junior Colleen McNutt is HC's returning hitter as McNutt posted a .337 batting average (second on the team) with 31 hits and 12 RBI. Other key hitters will be junior second baseman Becky Fair (.327, 18 hits) and senior shortstop Sara Lesko (.257, 26 hits, 15 RBI), who has started every game in her career.

Lake Superior State University: Lake Superior State expects to be much-improved after returning 11 letter winners and adding three junior college transfers to its roster in 2004. LSSU newcomers include standout hitters Julia "Rocky" Hall and Emily Bell from Oakland Community College, and Stacey Solomon from New York Institute of Technology. The Lakers' entire pitching staff returns, along with last year's leading hitter, catcher/outfielder Chelsea Sparrow (.291). Freshmen Erin Retherford (infield) and Ashly Rulason (outfield) will also challenge for a starting position. The Lakers, coached by 15-year veteran Don Myers, finished 5-44 overall and 4-12 in the GLIAC in 2003.

Mercyhurst College: The Mercyhurst Softball team is looking to rebound from a disappointing 2003 campaign under the leadership of new head coach, Sara Headley. Marissa Bartholomew (Jr., Boardman, OH) and Becky Ross (Sr., Erie, PA) are the core of the pitching staff. Bartholomew started a dozen games last year and completed four. She finished with a 3-8 record and a 5.70 earned run average. Ross led the team last year in appearances (28), innings pitched (94.1), and saves (4). She finished with a team-best 2.96 ERA and sixty-one strikeouts. Junior Kim Roberts will once again be the leader in the outfield. Roberts started all 44 games last year and hit .287. She led the squad in plate appearances (143), runs (18), and hits (41).

Northwood University: The Northwood University softball team may feature only three upperclassmen, but expectations for fourth-year head coach Heather Bruder's club are high. Last year, the Timberwolves strength was on the mound, and that should remain a strength led by sophomore Lisa Sheppard, who went 12-9 with a 1.47 ERA in her first season at Northwood. Sheppard tossed 18 complete games, and struck out 133 batters in 152 1/3 innings of work. Junior co-captain Ellie Neidhamer is expected to have a big year, playing anywhere in the field from catcher to shortstop. She led the team in RBI's a year ago (17). Junior Jackie Ruma led the returning players in batting average a year ago (.281), and is expected to provide even more offense this season. Ruma is also a key contributor on the mound, having started 15 games a year ago. Northwood features five freshmen on their 14-player roster, all of which may get a chance to contribute right away.

Saginaw Valley State University: The Cardinals went 21-21 overall in 2003 and finished 7-9 in the GLIAC. Head Coach Sabrina Lane begins her first season at the controls of the Cardinal softball program. The Cardinals return outfielder Jesse Kaniszewski (Kingston, Mich.) who batted .312 last year in 40 games and stole 15 bases. Courtney Pintek (Flushing, Mich.), a senior hurler, posted a 2.87 ERA and a 7-3 record on the mound last year.

Wayne State University: Last season, Wayne State University claimed its first NCAA Great Lakes Regional title and the school's first berth in the College World Series. With 12 returning letterwinners, head coach Gary Bryce is excited about his 23rd year as the Warriors mentor. Last year's squad, with one senior (Amy Thiede - 1-0, 3.36, 8.1 IP), won the second-most games (39) in school history.

In the circle, sophomore Meghan Misiak returns after earning the GLIAC Freshman of the Year award in 2003. Misiak went 26-10 with 10 shutouts, a 1.07 earned-run average and 167 strikeouts. Sophomore shortstop Sue Verbeem led the squad in most offensive categories in 2003 (runs-41, hits-62, HR-10, RBI-36, SLUG%-.572). Senior Maria D'Agostino has been WSU's No. 1 catcher the last three seasons. D'Agostino caught all 55 games in 2003 and batted .321 with 25 RBI. Senior 3B/DP Leah Ondrovick batted .318 last year and led the squad in walks (17) and on-base pct. (.394). Beth Berry, the school-record holder in career putouts, returns at first base after hitting .270 last season.