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GLIAC Softball Coaches Pick Northwood To Win 2006 Crown

NU Edges Defending GLIAC Tournament Champion Ferris State By Two Points

BAY CITY, Mich. -- The head softball coaches of the Great Lakes Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (GLIAC) chose Northwood University to win the league's 2006 championship in preseason balloting.

The Timberwolves, the conference's defending regular season champions, claimed four of 11 possible first-place votes and 90 total points. Northwood narrowly beat out Ferris State University (90-88) for the top spot in the poll. The Bulldogs finished two points behind NU while garnering three first-place votes.

Wayne State University claimed two first-place nods and the third position in the poll. The Warriors edged Gannon University by two points (76-74), which also earned two first-place votes.

Grand Valley State University landed in fifth place with 67 points, nine points ahead of Ashland University (58). Hillsdale College fell just short of the Eagles, tallying 55 points. Saginaw Valley State University placed eighth with 37 points.

Mercyhurst College (26 points), the University of Findlay (24) and Lake Superior State University (11) round out the poll, finishing ninth, tenth, and eleventh, respectively.

The league's 11 head softball 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 2006 GLIAC softball tournament will be held at the Emerson Park Softball Complex in Midland, Mich. The eight-team double elimination event will take place on Friday, May 5 and Saturday, May 6.

GLIAC softball teams open the 2006 conference season on Friday, Mar. 31.

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2006 GLIAC Preseason Softball Coaches Poll

Rank	School (first-place votes)	Points
1.	Northwood (4)	90
2.	Ferris State (3)	88
3.	Wayne State (2)	76
4.	Gannon (2)	74
5.	Grand Valley State	67
6.	Ashland	58
7.	Hillsdale	55
8.	Saginaw Valley State	37
9.	Mercyhurst	26
10.	Findlay	24
11.	Lake Superior State	10

2005 GLIAC Softball Final Standings*

Place	School	Record (GLIAC)
1.	Northwood*	34-14 (14-6)
1.	Ferris State*	31-20 (13-7)
3.	Gannon	33-18 (12-6)
4.	Hillsdale	21-19-1 (12-8)
5.	Grand Valley State	24-20 (13-7)
6.	Wayne State	21-22 (10-10)
7.	Saginaw Valley State	20-20 (10-8)
8.	Mercyhurst	20-21 (10-10)
9.	Ashland	27-23 (8-12)
10.	Findlay	12-28 (4-16)
11.	Lake Superior State	9-30 (2-18)

* - GLIAC Softball final standings are based on the average of regular season and tournament finishes. Ferris State and Northwood were declared 2005 GLIAC co-champions as NU finished first in the regular season and FSU won the tournament title.

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

Ashland University: Ten letterwinners return from last year's 27-23 Ashland University squad, the 14th straight AU team to finish above .500. Three of those players—junior outfielder Bree Beabout, senior outfielder Ashley Mayle and junior pitcher Jaime Williams—earned first team All-GLIAC accolades. Beabout, a first team all-conference honoree for the second time, led the Eagles with a .314 batting average and 22 runs scored, hit three home runs and drove in 14 runs. Mayle, the lone senior on this year's AU team, batted .307 with 14 RBI and posted team-best figures in doubles (11) and stolen bases (11). Williams experienced a breakthrough season inside the circle, becoming Ashland's ace. She was 17-13 with a 1.41 ERA and a GLIAC-best 243 strikeouts. Sheilah Gulas, entering her 10th season as Ashland's head coach, owns a 329-148 record with the Eagles.

Ferris State University: The 2005 season represented a noteworthy one for Ferris State as the Bulldogs gained a share of the GLIAC regular-season championship by winning the GLIAC Tournament. Ferris also made its fourth-ever NCAA DII Great Lakes Regional Tournament appearance en route to finishing the campaign at 31-20-0 overall, which represented the program's best season since the 2000 campaign (33-18-0).

Expectations are high for 2006 as the Bulldogs return 10 letterwinners from last season's squad which belted a school-record 31 home runs in those 51 contests. Offensively, Ferris is counting on another big season from senior outfielder Emily McLean (.378, 9 HR, 37 RBI), who earned 2005 GLIAC Player of the Year honors and was a National Fastpitch Coaches Association (NFCA) NCAA-II Great Lakes Region First-Team member. In the pitching circle, ninth-year head coach Keri Becker (256-166-1 coaching record) will have to replace the graduated Rachel Chartier, who was 16-11 with a 1.71 ERA in 32 appearances last season. Senior Carissa Quider (3-3, 2.82 ERA, 54.2 IP) and junior Jenna Thiede (12-6, 2.89 ERA, 118.2 IP) are the only experienced hurlers.

University of Findlay: The Oilers will be anchored by seniors Lana Beckstedt (.285) in left field, Lindsey Bouza at third base, and Dani Lowe (.274) at second base. They will be supported by juniors Michele Jordan (6-13, 2.87 ERA) at pitcher and center fielder Nicole Wagner. That is where the similarity to the 12-28 team of last season ends. UF will likely start at least four new players, several of them freshmen. Head Coach Ron Ammons begins his fourth year at Findlay, and has compiled a mark of 41-85.

Grand Valley State University: Grand Valley State returns 16 letterwinners and nine starters from the 2005 squad that went 24-20 overall and finished fifth in the GLIAC with a 13-7 record. Senior center fielder Tara Marsh led the Lakers with a .327 batting average and tallied 50 hits, 10 walks, and eight stolen bases. Senior pitcher Kristin Jenner posted a 10-4 record with a 1.76 ERA. She yielded just 30 earned runs, while recording 108 strikeouts. Head coach Doug Woods is set to begin his 16th season with the Lakers and has tallied a 574-246-3 overall record.

Gannon University: Twelve letterwinners, every defensive starter, and the entire pitching staff returns from a 33-18 squad that qualified for the NCAA Division II Tournament last season for the second time in school history. The Lady Knights finished 12-6 in conference play in 2005 and were eliminated one game shy of the GLIAC Championship tilt. Sixth-year head coach Beth Pierce has guided Gannon through some of the program's best years, compiling a 159-83-1 record during her tenure. She ranks second all-time at Gannon in coaching victories and 33rd among active NCAA Division II coaches in winning percentage (.656).

Seniors Joanna Fergus and Allison Gerger are Gannon's top returning power hitters. Fergus hit .362 with 10 home runs and 46 RBI last season. Gerger hit .315 with eight homers and 25 RBI. Returnees Steph Christ (.335) and Charity Sharp (.324) also hit over .300 in 2005. Sophomore Lauren Soldner and junior Jenn Kulick both return after logging every inning on the mound last season for the Lady Knights. Soldner went 20-10 with a 1.49 ERA as a true freshman while Kulick posted a 13-8 mark with a 1.95 ERA.

Hillsdale College: Entering her second season as head coach, Sunny Jones is hoping to guide the Hillsdale College softball team to bigger and better things in 2006. Last year, the Chargers surprised many with their fourth-place finish in the conference, and 21-19-1 overall record. Hillsdale has many weapons at its disposal this season that should at least match that performance.

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Both pitchers return, as junior Amy Whaley (St. Clair Shores, Mich.) and sophomore Aimee Genter (Archbold, Ohio) combined to win all 21 games for Hillsdale last season. Catching them will be First-Team All-GLIAC catcher Ashley Wolff (Clinton Township, Mich.) who enters her junior season as the second half of what figures to be a potent battery, regardless of who is taking the ball on the mound. Junior co-captain Jamie Meyers (Toledo, Ohio) is the team's leading returning hitter after belting seven home runs in 2005. Senior co-captain Kaci Jagutis (Monroe, Mich.) and sophomore Katie Botsis (Portage, Mich.) will lend stability to the infield and outfield, respectively.

Lake Superior State University: Lake Superior State will be led by senior pitcher Cherish Samuels, who is expected to become the school's all-time strikeout leader, and senior center fielder Audrey Hewitt. Samuels enters this season with 274 strikeouts after finishing seventh in the GLIAC in strikeouts in 2005 with 98. Hewitt, a three-year starting center fielder, finished ninth in the league in batting at .341 and has a career batting average of .286. Other returning starters for the Lakers include senior pitcher/second baseman Ashley Hughes, sophomore pitcher Stephanie Reveley, senior first baseman Chelsea Rhadigan, junior shortstop Erin Retherford and sophomore outfielder Erin Hulett. LSSU, under 17-year coach Don Myers, finished 9-30 overall last season. The Lakers were 2-18 in the GLIAC.

Mercyhurst College: Mercyhurst will be returning its entire pitching staff in 2006 led by junior Jen Feret (Boardman, OH). Feret racked up 129 strike outs in 142 innings pitched. She finished the season at 13-7 with one save and a 1.18 ERA. Feret also leads the returners in batting with 5 home runs and 19 RBIs and a .279 average.

The Lakers are returning four starters in the field. Kate Conochan will once again share time between first base and designated hitter this year. Kate batted .274 last year with 11 RBIs and 6 doubles. The Lakers are led by head softball coach Sara Headley who has tallied a 36-44-1 record in two seasons at Mercyhurst.

Northwood University: Expectations are high for the Northwood University softball team, coming off the first GLIAC Championship in program history in 2005. NU returns seven of its nine position players and both of its starting pitchers. The Timberwolves will be led by senior pitcher Lisa Shepard, who turned in a remarkable junior campaign. She ranked first or second in the GLIAC in every pitching category in 2005 while setting school records for wins (24), strikeouts (199) and earned run average (0.78). Junior Carly Laxton is also back after winning 10 games, and will be joined by talented newcomer Sheena Smith to form an even stronger pitching staff for the 2006 season.

Offensively, GLIAC Freshman of the Year Julie Olson leads an attack that scored 66 more runs in 2005 than they did in 2004. Olson led the league with a .380 batting average. Sophomore Sam Thacker ranked among the GLIAC leaders in RBI's (32) while hitting .309.

Saginaw Valley State University: SVSU returns a strong core this season for head coach Sabrina Lane entering her third season. Junior Lorelea Rice (Caledon East, Ont./Mayfield Secondary) is the Cards top all-around player leading the team with a .298 average and also going 9-7 on the mound with a 1.66 ERA. Rice played in all 40 games in 2005 and collected eight doubles and 15 RBI. She also threw three shutouts and 105.1 innings with 75 strikeouts and 26 walks.

Senior first baseman Tabitha Greenwood (Vassar, Mich.) is the Cards top power hitter who smacked four homers last season and batted .265 in 39 games. She scored 16 runs and drove in 13 in 113 at-bats. Senior Karen Ray (Fenton, Mich./Lake Fenton) posted a 1.39 ERA and picked up 10 wins for SVSU in 2005. Ray struck out 154 hitters and walked 18 in 135.2 innings. She was named Second Team All-Region.

Wayne State University: The Warriors have 13 returning letterwinners from a squad that finished 10-10 in the league and was ranked regionally for most of the season. The return of seven starters and the top two pitchers gives head coach Gary Bryce hopes of a successful 25th season. Bryce has a 777-500-6 record in 24 years at WSU. Last season, the Warriors finished 21-22 overall while playing one of the toughest schedules in the country.

In the circle, Sarah Ytsma won 11 games last year while Meghan Misiak recorded 10 victories. Opponents batted just .229 off Misiak, but she allowed 70 walks in 126.2 innings, while Ytsma had a team-best 86 strikeouts and four shutouts. Shortstop Sue Verbeem, a 2005 GLIAC First Team selection, enters her senior year as one of the team's top offensive players. She has started 155 games in her WSU tenure with a .333 career batting average. Sarah Kish started 42 of WSU's 43 games a year ago and batted .255. She threw out 42 percent of opponent base stealers.