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## GLIAC Softball Coaches Pick GVSU for 2003 Conference Title

*Lakers Seek Second Straight Regional Crown and Return Trip to Division II Championship Game*

**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 2003 championship.

Grand Valley State University, last season's conference runner-up, earned eight of 11 possible first-place votes and 98 total points. Ashland University, the defending GLIAC tournament and overall champion, received three first-place votes and tallied 91 points to finish second in the poll.

Wayne State University, 2002 GLIAC regular season champion, finished third in the poll with 77 points. Gannon University finished just three points behind the Warriors (74) to place fourth. Ferris State University was fifth after totaling 54 points.

Saginaw Valley State University edged out Mercyhurst College by two points (47-45) to finish in sixth place. Hillsdale College nipped Northwood University by the same margin for eighth place in the poll.

The University of Findlay, with 32 points, and Lake Superior State University, with 11 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. Grand Valley State claimed the regional title, earning a trip to the NCAA Division II Softball Championship in Salem, Va. The Lakers advanced to the Division II championship game before falling to St. Mary's (Tex.), 4-0.

The 2003 GLIAC softball tournament will be held at Veterans' Park in Bay City, Mich. Saginaw Valley State University will host the two-day double-elimination tournament on May 2 and 3.

GLIAC softball teams open the 2003 conference season on Friday, Mar. 28.

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<b>2003 GLIAC Preseason Softball Coaches Poll</b>		
<i>Rank</i>	<i>School (first-place votes)</i>	<i>Points</i>
1.	Grand Valley State (8) .....	98
2.	Ashland (3) .....	91
3.	Wayne State .....	77
4.	Gannon .....	74
5.	Ferris State .....	54
6.	Saginaw Valley State .....	47
7.	Mercyhurst .....	45
8.	Hillsdale .....	39
9.	Northwood .....	37
10.	Findlay .....	32
11.	Lake Superior State .....	11

<b>2002 GLIAC Softball Final Standings*</b>		
<i>Place</i>	<i>School</i>	<i>Record (GLIAC)</i>
1.	Ashland .....	28-16 (12-6)
2.	Grand Valley State .....	49-12-1 (13-5)
3.	Gannon .....	30-13-1 (13-7)
4.	Wayne State .....	31-19 (12-2)
5.	Mercyhurst .....	20-20-2 (11-8)
6.	Ferris State .....	16-29 (7-13)
7.	Hillsdale .....	27-14 (11-9)
8.	Northwood .....	15-29 (8-10)
9.	Findlay .....	17-23 (4-14)
10.	Saginaw Valley State ..	22-20-1 (6-11)
11.	Lake Superior State .....	10-33 (4-16)

\* - 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 hope the momentum gained at the end of last year carries over to 2003. AU ended last season in the regional championship game, one step away from the NCAA championships. The Eagles were 28-16 and on the way to the regional tourney, won a GLIAC championship. Head coach Sheilah Gulas is in her seventh season at AU where she's 235-90. The leader of this team will again be pitcher Josie Nelson. The junior was 19-7 a year ago with a 0.84 ERA and 264 strikeouts in 191.2 innings. She also hit .327. Senior second baseman Shay Mulford hit .313 and will be the glue that holds together a veteran infield.

**Ferris State University:** Ferris State has high expectations for success this season with the return of 11 letterwinners from a 16-29 team which placed fourth at the GLIAC Tournament. The most significant loss for the Bulldogs this spring is head coach Keri Becker, who recently was called to active armed forces duty. However, the team should be in capable hands with co-head coaches Lesa Bickley and Chad Haberland taking over the reigns in an interim capacity. Bickley was head coach at Findlay for three years (1998-00) while Haberland was an assistant under Becker for two seasons (1999-00). Among the notable returnees is senior pitcher Amanda Opbroek (10-14, 1.41 ERA), who also batted .235 with 11 RBI. The infield is solidified at the corners with the return of junior third baseman Dana Peuler (.261, 12 RBI), a 2002 All-GLIAC Second Team pick, and converted junior shortstop Nicki Merchant (.272, 16 RBI) at first base.

**University of Findlay:** First-year head coach Ron Ammons takes charge of a program which finished 17-23 last season, 4-14 in the GLIAC. UF returns four seniors, pitcher/centerfielder Stacy Sharp (9-6, 1.22 ERA, .192 BA), shortstop Brooke Bower (.299, 21 RBI), second baseman Stacy Scholz (.205), and third baseman Sarah Zeiter (.300, 33 RBI). Findlay opens in Florida on March 2 for a 10-game swing which includes 15th-ranked LeMoyne and 22nd-ranked Tampa. Assisting Ammons are Tom Jakubiec and Randy Ammons.

**Grand Valley State University:** Grand Valley State is coming off a season that saw the Lakers finish 49-12-1 and earn a national runner-up finish in the NCAA Championship tournament. The World Series appearance was the first-ever for GVSU after winning the Great Lakes Regional Tournament. Head Coach Doug Woods is entering his 13th season at Grand Valley and has led the Lakers to a 465-212-3 record, including six straight seasons with 40+ wins. The Lakers are returning eight starters off of last year's squad, including NFCA First Team All-American pitcher Jennifer Mackson. Mackson was third in the nation with a 0.62 ERA and seventh in Division II with 317 strikeouts. Seniors Kerri Jonas and Bobbi Conner will lead the offensive attack. Jonas earned First Team All-Region honors after leading GVSU with 18 extra-base hits, while Conner was a First Team All-GLIAC selection.

**Gannon University:** Gannon hopes to compete for the GLIAC championship once again in 2003. The Lady Knights advanced to the GLIAC Championship last season for the first time in school history before finishing the season at 30-13-1 with a 3-0 loss to Ashland in the finals. Head coach Beth Pierce enters her third season after guiding the Lady Knights to a 70-27-1 record during her first two seasons. Junior Heather Ford, senior Megan Smith, and senior Kayla Calorio are expected to form one of the GLIAC's best pitching staffs. Ford was named to the NFCA All-Great Lakes Region first team last season after going 16-6 with a 0.51 ERA. Smith, a GLIAC honorable mention selection in 2002, was 14-7 with a 0.92 ERA. Junior Kristen Tworek and senior Amy Alaksin will lead Gannon's offensive charge.

**Hillsdale College:** The Hillsdale College softball team will head into the 2003 season with high expectations as the Chargers bring in a wealth of freshmen talent, while only losing one senior from last year's team that finished 27-13 overall. The Chargers will be led by a group of four seniors: Gretchen Messenger, Jenna Robison (.342, 38 hits, 16 RBI), Kelli Fifelski (.275, 28 hits, 16 RBI), and Julie Westover (.250, 34 hits, 18 runs). Messenger was injured last season and only played in 16 games. On the mound, junior Joelle Frantz returns after posting a 12-7 mark with a 2.53 ERA last season. Frantz set the single-season school record for strikeouts with 137 last year.

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**Lake Superior State University:** Junior Raelyn Zbytowski will lead a young pitching staff for Lake Superior State, which finished 10-33 overall and 4-16 in the GLIAC last season. Zbytowski was 2-12 with a 4.71 earned run average last year. LSSU's pitching staff will also include freshmen Cherish Samuels, Kristen Schirmer and Ashley Hughes. Third baseman Brooke Hall (.267) and designated player Lindsey Drow (.250) are the Lakers' only seniors and co-captains. LSSU head coach Don Myers is entering his 14th season.

**Mercyhurst College:** Following one of the best seasons in years in 2002 (20-20-2), the Lady Lakers are looking for even more improvement in 2003, having lost only two seniors from the 2002 squad. The Lady Lakers return four pitchers: senior Jessica Taylor (4-4, 3.30 ERA), junior Becky Ross (8-4, 1.39, six saves), junior Stacy Pastva (4-5, 2.61), and sophomore Marissa Bartholomew (1-5, 4.40). Ross led Division II in saves and made the GLIAC Honorable Mention squad. The infield has three starters returning. Sophomore Rachelle Haight (.288) returns at third, sophomore Shanna McDowell (.262 AVG) is back at second, and Bartholomew (.291, .994 FLD%) will hold down first. Behind the plate for the Lakers will be seniors Shelley Haefner (.265, .955 FLD%) and Rachael Confer (.285, .966 FLD%), who was named Second Team All-GLIAC designated hitter in 2002. Last year's starting right fielder, junior Molly Ryan (.170), and center fielder, sophomore Kim Roberts (.330, 11 stolen bases), are also back.

**Northwood University:** The 2003 Timberwolves would like to move themselves into the upper echelon of the GLIAC and fight for more respectability. This year's pitching rotation will feature sophomore Jackie Ruma. Ruma appeared in 26 games in 2002 and threw a team-leading 139.2 innings (2.05 ERA). She led the team with 89 strikeouts, which was sixth-best for a season in school history. Senior Heather Vernes turned into a solid starter last season, leading the team with eight wins and a 1.86 ERA. Senior Andrea Rickert hit .216 for the T-Wolves in 2002 and can play all three outfield positions. She had six doubles and 14 RBI's last season and is the leading returning run-producer from last year. Junior Jennifer Burkhardt will begin the season as the starting catcher. She has split time behind the plate in her first two years and will look to provide solid defense and added power to the lineup.

**Saginaw Valley State University:** Coming off the team's fifth winning season in six years under head coach Fred Neering, the 2003 SVSU softball team features a mix of experienced players, and ten talented newcomers. SVSU enters the season with a strong pitching staff, anchored by juniors Courtney Pintek and Christina Fuciarelli, who combined for 19 of SVSU's 22 wins last season. The Cardinals' outfield features three experienced players in Jesse Kaniszewski, Haley Slade, and Leya Taylor. The Cardinals return Katie Albert at second base and catcher Kelly Martin to the infield. Martin enters the season just two home runs shy of the school's all-time record.

**Wayne State University:** Last season, Wayne State University won its 11th GLIAC regular-season championship and fifth in the last 10 years with a 12-2 league ledger. With eight returning letterwinners, head coach Gary Bryce (681-441-5) is excited about his 22nd year as the Warriors mentor. Beth Berry returns at first base after earning Third Team All-America accolades in 2001. Freshman Sue Verbeem is slated to be the starting shortstop. Rookie Jordan Sinclair is scheduled to be the third baseman when not pitching. Junior Maria D'Agostino has been WSU's No. 1 catcher the last two seasons. In the outfield, Bryce has junior Johanna Proulx in leftfield, freshman Jessica Snelgrove in centerfield and sophomore Autumn Batyik in rightfield. In the circle, senior Amy Thiede returns after winning nine games and recording four shutouts last season. Sophomore Lisa Gauthier was last season's GLIAC Freshman of the Year after compiling a 1.09 earned-run average in 90 innings.