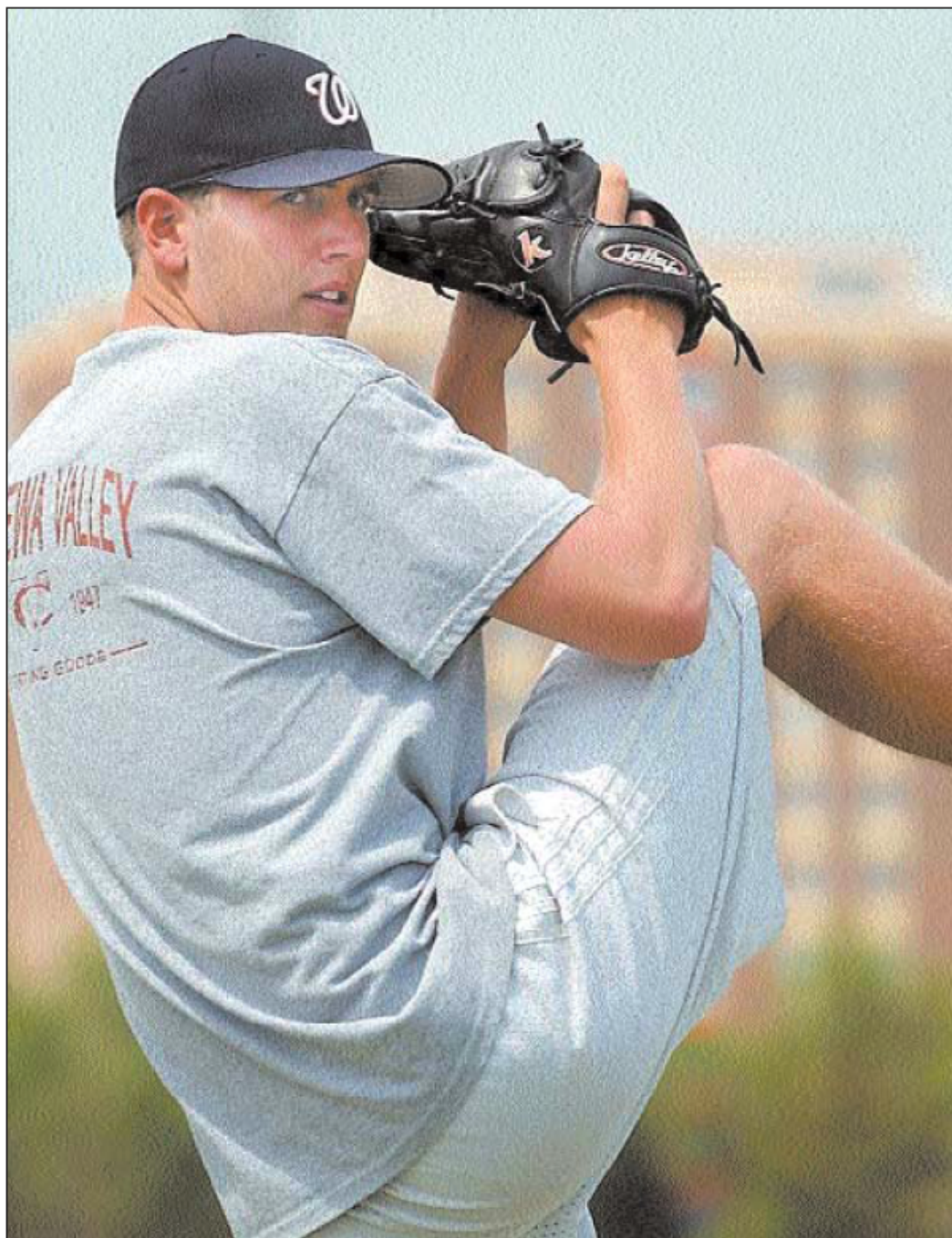




MSU BASEBALL TEAM STARTS REGIONAL PLAY TODAY



John Gross

Senior pitcher Jon Bjelland has compiled a 21-1 record in three seasons at Minnesota State University. Bjelland is 10-0 this season.

Ace on deck

Unbeaten lefty Jon Bjelland will take mound on Day 2 of regional tournament

By Chad Courrier
 Free Press Staff Writer

MANKATO — Jon Bjelland had just walked two batters and beamed another to load the bases with nobody out. It was an elimination game in the Central Region baseball tournament last May against North Central Conference rival Nebraska-Omaha, and Minnesota State's hopes of advancing were in jeopardy.

Associate head coach Matt Magers went to the mound and challenged Bjelland, telling him that if he wasn't ready to pitch, he'd find another who was. The next batter made good contact, but the liner was nabbed by the first baseman. Then, the following batter hit a liner to the gap, but the outfielder snared the ball and returned it to the infield in

time to double off a runner.

"That was a big step for him," Magers said. "Mentally, he's gotten a lot tougher. I want to see how tough kids are, how they bounce back when they don't have success. How, if he walks someone, nine out of 10 times, he strikes the next guy out."

The Mavericks (44-8) open the North Central Region baseball tournament at noon today against Nebraska-Omaha at Warrensburg, Mo. On almost any other pitching staff, Bjelland would be the ace, starting this regional opener. But that's the role of senior Dane Secott, meaning Bjelland will be standing in the dugout, encouraging teammates and charting pitches, preparing to start Friday's second game of the tournament.

"That's Dane's role, he's our guy,"

North Central Region baseball tournament

Who
 Minnesota State vs. Nebraska-Omaha
When
 Noon today
Where
 Warrensburg, Mo.
Radio
 KGAC 100.5 FM

Bjelland said.

Bjelland's numbers, this season and last, are eye-popping. The 6-foot-5, 215-pound left-hander is climbing on Minnesota State's all-time pitching charts, sitting fifth with 21 wins and seventh with 184 strikeouts.

"I'm a lot more confident," he said. "I'm staying in shape, getting stronger, doing everything a pitcher needs to do."

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BJELLAND: Pitcher being watched by professional scouts

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Bjelland, who was recruited by Minnesota State out of Barron, Wis., chose Division I Butler, but when things didn't work out, he transferred back here. He took a medical red-shirt season to have bone chips removed from his left elbow, then pitched in eight games — four of which were starts — in 2005, recording 18 strikeouts in a game against Winona State. His 5-0 record was a sign of things to come.

"He's definitely a No. 1 pitcher on another staff, but the thing I've liked about Jon is that he's gotten better each year," Magers said. "He was our No. 4 pitcher (in 2005),

then he worked his way up (No. 3) last year.

"The first two years, he could only go four, five innings. His pitch count was always up so he couldn't go deep into a game. But he's throwing more strikes now."

Last season, he posted a 6-1 record, and his earned-run average dropped nearly a run to 2.86, though he still walked 38 in 56 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings. He spent last summer with the Eau Claire, Wis., franchise in the Northwoods League. At Eau Claire, Bjelland posted a 4-5 record with a 3.09 ERA, earning midseason All-Star honors.

Now a senior, he's 10-0, making him 21-1 in three seasons at Minnesota State.

Another victory would give him the school's single-season record. The ERA is down to 2.26, and in 63 $\frac{1}{3}$ innings, he's walked 31 with 86 strikeouts.

During a game earlier this season, he threw a fastball that hit 90 mph, and professional scouts have been watching him closely ever since. As a fifth-year senior, Bjelland will be eligible to sign with a professional team as soon as the Mavericks' season ends, or he can wait to see what might happen in the Major League Baseball draft June 7.

"(Ninety) is the magic number," Magers said. "He's finally grown into his body, and mentally, he's become better. He's shown that he

could be ready for professional baseball."

But first, there is this regional tournament as the Mavericks achieved one of their season's goals.

Last year, the Mavericks came within two victories of winning the regional and advancing to Division II's final eight.

"Last year was a learning experience," Bjelland said. "We know what to expect from the competition, and we know what we have to do to win. We have almost the same team back, and there have been a lot of expectations. We've already broken the (school) wins record, and now the goals change. Our goal is to win the regional."