

MINNESOTA STATE BASEBALL PREVIEW



Luie Grossberg

Ryan Greene (right) belts tosses from Minnesota State teammate Dane Allen on Monday. The Mavericks open their season Thursday in Georgia.

Title quest

Mavericks want conference crown that barely eluded them in 2005

By Brian Ojanpa
Free Press Staff Writer

MANKATO— The weather still says winter, but Minnesota State's baseball schedule says two games on Thursday.

That's why Dean Bowyer's Mavericks were shagging flies outside on Monday, never mind that they had to sidestep snow piles to do it.

MSU opens its season Thursday in Georgia. The Mavericks will play five games there, return home for a doubleheader with Concordia-St. Paul in the Metrodome, then get back on a plane for a slate of games in Florida.

All in preparation for a 2006 campaign to capture the one that got away — conference championship, that is.

The Mavericks dropped three of four games on the last weekend of the season last year at Nebraska-Omaha, giving the like-nicknamed Mavericks the North Central Conference title.

"There's not a day that goes by that

I don't think about that," said MSU senior pitcher Matt McMurtry. "We thought we had the better team; we just didn't play up to our potential."

This coming season could be a reprise, because Nebraska-Omaha and MSU will again meet the last weekend of the season, this time in Mankato.

"They're our biggest rival now, and we're definitely looking for them to be really good again this year," McMurtry said.

MSU lost eight letterman but returns 17 from a squad that went 36-17 last season, 14-6 in the NCC.

"We have a veteran club, but it's basically a junior club," says Bowyer, who has only four seniors on the roster.

Among those is McMurtry, a first-team NCC and first-team All-Region selection last year.

The 5-foot-11, 180-pound lefty from North Platte, Neb., anchored the pitching staff last season with a 6-2 record and 2.53 ERA.

"Matt's a great leader. He doesn't say a lot but he does the little things he needs to do to be successful," Bowyer said. "Guys see that and they just follow him."

Bowyer says MSU should acquit itself well this year in the NCC arms race. "We have the pitching. I don't think any teams in the conference will have the depth we do."

Joining McMurtry will be junior righty Mark Dolenc (4-4, 2.67, honorable mention All-NCC), along with Dane Secott, Jon Bjelkand, Ben King and Bob Wellman.

Newcomers who could make contributions are freshman Andrew Vlasak and junior transfer Tyler Sander, who went 12-0 last season at Iowa Central Community College.

The offense starts with first-team All-NCC infielder Scott Kemp, who hit .357 with 18 RBIs in 2005.

Other key returnees are junior Adam Sudbeck (.261, 6 home runs), junior Eric Austvold (.305, 6 home runs), senior Ryan Greene (.326, 36 RBIs) and senior Dane Allen (.333, 8 homers).

This season, all six NCC teams will play in the conference tournament, which will be hosted by MSU.