THE LAST HURRAH!

With seven seniors returning for their final season, it is the 'last hurrah' for the most successful class in the softball program. This year's senior class has won 104 out of the 133 games they have played. However, if you ask them, that is not quite good enough. After reaching the NAIA National Tournament for the first time in 2004, the Saints moved over to NCAA Division III for 2005 and fell just short of an independent bid going 34-7.

"We definitely feel we have some unfinished business," said All-American pitcher Laura Heise (Sr, Richfield, MN). "Not getting into the regional tournament last year was a disappointment."

The 2006 version of the Saints will have essentially the same look since there were no seniors in the program last season. Add to that some talented freshman and transfer students and it is no wonder they have such optimism.

"Every year is a new challenge, but this year we combine experience with the most depth we have ever had," said head coach Jen Walter (7th season, 163-93 overall). "My challenge is to find the right combinations; to get the most out of each player. We definitely have some talent."

2006 POSITION-BY-POSITION OUTLOOK

Pitching: All American senior Laura Heise has rewritten the Saints record book, most notably wins (69), ERA (0.68) and strikeouts (808). She has also been the Saints leading hitter the past three season compiling a .440 batting average, 38 doubles, 21 homeruns and 105 RBI.

Junior Rilee Dawson, who went 16-4 last season, is recovering from off-season elbow surgery but should be ready for the season opener in February. Freshman Amy Jansen (St. Peter, MN) had a storied high school career at St. Peter, taking her team to the state tournament her sophomore year and within one game of it her senior year. She is expected to contribute some quality innings in her first year.

"With the addition of Amy Jansen I feel we have one of the best one, two, three punches in the region," said Walter. "They each have a different style which will allow us to get whatever match up we feel works the best."

Catching: The Saints seem to have it all at this position as they return seniors Kelly Cordie (Lino Lakes, MN), who was named to the conference All-Defensive team, along with all-conference player Paula Madden (Britt, MN). They allowed only 20 stolen bases, while throwing out 14 runners. They also combined to hit .361, with 23 doubles, 5 homeruns and 59 RBI's. Sophomore Katie Brown (Emmett, ID) will also see some action in the spring after an impressive fall along with transfer Gina Garramone (Moorhead, MN/Minnesota-Morris)

"Our catching staff is extremely solid. They can do it all, offensively and defensively," said Walter.

Infield: The infield returns seniors Jody Yurczyk (2B, Holdingford, MN), Sara Kneisl (3B, Wadena, MN) and Andrea Thomas (SS, Grand Rapids, MN) along with junior Missy Erickson (1B, Becker, MN). Both Kneisl and Thomas made the conference All-Defensive team. Yurczyk had a break out year offensively hitting .404 and stealing a team leading 19 bases, while becoming a solid lead off hitter. Kayla Kahlainen (SS/2B, New York Mills, MN) had a solid fall and is a will be backup for both middle infield positions. Cordie also fills in at third base. Heise and Dawson will back up Erickson at first base.

"This is a very experienced, intelligent and confident infield," said Walter. "Each year they have gotten better and better and hopefully the best is yet to come."

Outfield: The addition of transfer Erica Bond (Jr, Mountain State University-Tenn.), along with the maturity of Katie Brown, will help solidify an already talented outfield with the return of two time all-region right fielder Kristi Erickson (Sr, Becker, MN) and center fielder Joann Juten (Jr, Duluth, MN). Erickson has been solid at the plate hitting .376, with 107 runs scored, 39 stolen bases and 84 RBI her first three seasons. Also, available for the outfield are Yurczyk, Kneisl and freshman Chelsey Weiss (Brainerd, MN).

"Erickson has been solid both offensively and defensively since she took over right field her freshman year, and Juten had an outstanding fall," said Walter. "We'll try some different combination to see what works best, but I'm happy with the options that we have."

2006 SCHEDULE

Vying for a NCAA Postseason Tournament bid, the Saints have assembled their most difficult schedule to date. They open with Gustavus Adolphus on February 25 and then take on two time defending champion University of St. Thomas on March 10 before leaving for their spring trip in San Antonio, Texas and taking on Trinity University, a 2005 region qualifier. They will also travel to St. Louis, Missouri to play Washington University, ranked #1 in the country for most of the 2005 season, Fontbonne College, another 2005 regional qualifier, and Maryville University, a 2004 regional qualifier. Doubleheaders against UW-Eau Claire, the 2005 WIAC regular season champions, UW-Stout, who won the 2005 WIAC postseason tournament and Hamline University, a top four team in the 2005 MIAC race, round out the schedule. Throw in trying to defend their seventh Upper Midwest Athletic Conference title and it becomes apparent the Saints will be tested every step of the way.

"I don't think anyone can accuse us of playing an easy schedule. I get tired just thinking about it," said Walter. "However, these seniors and the rest of the team have never backed down from a challenge. They love to compete. Let's go have some fun!"