



NORTHEAST CONFERENCE • 399 CAMPUS DR. • SOMERSET, NJ 08873 • PH: (732) 469-0440 • FAX: (732) 469-0744 • WWW.NORTHEASTCONFERENCE.ORG



www.twitter.com/NECsports
www.facebook.com/NECsports
www.youtube.com/NECsports

For Immediate Release
February 12, 2014

Central Connecticut Edges Bryant in 2015 NEC Softball Preseason Poll

Somerset, NJ -- Central Connecticut State has been picked to win the 2015 NEC Softball Championship, edging defending champion Bryant by the slimmest of margins, as voted by the league's nine softball coaches in the annual preseason poll.

The Blue Devils and the Bulldogs each received four first-place votes. Perennial powers LIU Brooklyn and Robert Morris ranked third and fourth, respectively, with the Blackbirds claiming the remaining first-place vote. LIU and RMU have combined for 19 NEC Tournament titles, including a league record 13 for the Blackbirds.

Fairleigh Dickinson edged out Saint Francis U for the fifth spot. Wagner, Mount St. Mary's and Sacred Heart earned the remaining votes to round out the nine team poll.

CCSU returns the NEC Pitcher of the Year in senior Laura Messina (Marlton, NJ/Camden Catholic). Messina has raked in the preseason accolades as she readies for her senior year on the diamond. Messina was named to the 2015 USA Softball Collegiate Player of the Year Watch List and was ranked as the eighth-best pitcher in the nation by *Fast Pitch News*.

After a close losses in the NEC Tournament to Bryant and LIU Brooklyn last season, Messina will look to carry the Blue Devils to a second NEC title in three years. Messina pitched 14 shutouts last season, which tied for the national lead. The senior hurler and three-time All-NEC honoree led the conference in innings pitched (238.2), strikeouts (266), strikeouts looking (62) and games started (37). Messina will look to further obliterate the CCSU record books, as she already owns the school's career records for wins, games, games started, complete games, innings pitched, strikeouts, and holds the single season records for appearances, innings pitched, complete games, wins and strikeouts.

Fellow senior Kat Malcolm (Branford, CT/Mercy) returns to centerfield and will look to pace the Blue Devil offense. Malcolm led the Blue Devils with a .511 slugging percentage and was second on the team with a .311 average. Junior shortstop Eileen Purcell (Nutley, NJ/Nutley) started in all 45 games for the CCSU and led the team with 24 RBI.

2015 Northeast Conference Softball Preseason Coaches Poll

1. Central Connecticut (4)
2. Bryant (4)
3. LIU Brooklyn (1)
4. Robert Morris
5. Fairleigh Dickinson
6. Saint Francis U
7. Wagner
8. Mount St. Mary's
9. Sacred Heart

First place votes in parentheses

(Central Connecticut Edges Bryant in 2015 NEC Softball Preseason Poll • Page 1-of-3)

In her first season in 2014, Shayne Lotito led Bryant to its first regular season NEC title and a program record 32 wins. The Bulldogs defeated LIU Brooklyn 5-3 in the NEC title game and earned a spot in the NCAA Tournament, falling 14-4 to #7 Oklahoma and 10-6 to Hofstra in the Norman Regional.

Bryant junior Elle Madsen (Wheat Ridge, CO/Wheat Ridge) was a force for the Bulldogs on the mound and at the plate. Madsen had a season to remember, topping the conference in several statistical categories en-route to earning NEC Player of the Year and NEC Tournament MVP honors. The junior hit .346, led the conference in home runs (13), total bases (105), and tied for the league lead with 41 RBI. On the mound, Madsen topped the NEC in wins (25) and was second in innings pitched (236.1), strikeouts looking (50) and starts (35).

Madeline Velasquez (Los Angeles, CA/Village Christian) and Hayley Bottino (Canyon Country, CA/Canyon) were key contributors to Bryant's title run and joined Madsen on the All-NEC First Team. Velasquez, a senior outfielder, ranked among the top four leaders in the conference in hits (60), RBI (38), doubles (13), and total bases (87). Bottino, a junior, was steady all around, posting a .291 average, tossing 53 innings from the mound, and played solid defense at the hot corner.

LIU Brooklyn will look to add to their conference-best 13 NEC Tournament title. The Blackbirds return their top two hitters in shortstop Lauren Morizi (San Diego, CA/Torrey Pines) and outfielder Whitney West (West Hills, CA/El Camino Real). Morizi, a graduate student, led the circuit with 18 doubles and posted team bests in batting average (.335), RBI (20), slugging percentage (.463), walks (30), runs (29), and on base percentage (.440). West, a junior who was an All-NEC second teamer in 2014, followed Morizi with a .317 average and registered a team high 60 hits.

After failing to reach the NEC tournament for the first time since 2007, Robert Morris ace Nicole Sleith (Smithton, PA/Yough) will look to lead the Colonials back to title contention. Sleith topped the conference in opponent batting average (.179) and was second in ERA (1.32).

All-NEC first team members Tess Apke (Mount Lebanon, PA/Mount Lebanon) and Jordan Gurganus (Chesapeake, VA/Hickory) return for another campaign at Moon Township. Apke led the Colonials in almost every offensive category, posting team highs in batting average (.354), runs (25), hits (52), doubles (9), home runs (7), RBI (25), total bases (82), slugging percentage (.558) and on base percentage (.382). Gurganus hit .307 and paced the Colonials with eight stolen bases.

Fairleigh Dickinson returns a trio of seniors who were All-NEC second team members that played key roles in leading the Knights to their first NEC Tournament appearance in school history and a program record 11 NEC wins. Megan Reiner (Los Angeles, CA/John Marshall) was a force on the mound, completing 19 of her 23 starts and posting a 1.97 ERA. Second baseman Cindy Zamudio (Wilmington, CA/Redondo Union) posted team highs in batting average (.333), runs (21), and on base percentage (.397), while third baseman Angelique Nieves (Union City, NJ/High Tech) hit .311 and led the team in hits (38) and doubles (11).

Alexis Bower (Cogan Station, PA/Williamsport Area) had an outstanding debut season for Saint Francis U, earning NEC Rookie of the Year honors and first team All-NEC. Bower was a force for SFU, leading the team in runs (31), hits (46), RBI (35), total bases (77), and tied for the lead in doubles (10). Equally impressive on the mound, Bower paced the Red Flash with a 2.36 ERA, 16 wins and 93 strikeouts.

Wagner senior shortstop Kelsey Parker (Lynnwood, WA/Lynnwood) and junior catcher Brenda Bott (Fountain Valley, CA/Fountain Valley) provided a 1-2 punch to lead the Seahawks offense last season when they were both tabbed to the All-NEC second team. Parker led the conference in batting average with a .444 clip while Bott followed in second with a .357 mark. Parker also ranked first in the NEC in slugging percentage (.741), on base percentage (.493) and tied for the lead in RBI (41). Parker more than doubled her 2013 batting average en-route to earning the NEC Most Improved Player Award.

Points of #NECPRIDE

Four NEC student-athletes earned NFCA All-Region honors for their 2014 campaigns. Elle Madsen (Wheat Ridge, CO/Wheat Ridge) and Madeline Velasquez (Los Angeles, CA/Village Christian) earned All-Northeast Region honors. Madsen was named to the second team and Velasquez earned a spot on the third team. RMU's Nicole Sleith (Smithton, PA/Yough) and Megan Reiner (Los Angeles, CA/John Marshall) earned spots on the Great Lakes Region third team.

Robert Morris senior catcher Samantha Santillo (Ellwood City, PA/Lincoln) has won the NEC Golden Glove Award in each of her three seasons in Moon Township. Santillo is the only player in NEC history to win multiple Gold Glove awards and the only Colonial to win the same major postseason award at least three times.

Robert Morris registered the second-highest team grade point average (3.61) among all Division I softball programs during the 2013-14 academic year. Robert Morris is the only Division I school in the country to have its softball program rank among the top-five in team GPA in each of the past six years.

Competition will be fierce, yet familiar this season. All of last season's major award winners return, including 17 of 24 All-NEC members.

About The Northeast Conference

Now in its 34th year, the Northeast Conference is an NCAA Division I collegiate athletic association consisting of 10 institutions of higher learning located throughout six states. Media coverage of the NEC extends to four of the largest markets in the United States - New York (#1), Pittsburgh (#23), Baltimore (#27), and Hartford/New Haven (#30). Founded in 1981 as the basketball-only ECAC Metro Conference, the NEC has grown to sponsor 22 championship sports for men and women and now enjoys automatic access to 14 different NCAA Championships. NEC member institutions include Bryant, Central Connecticut, Fairleigh Dickinson, LIU Brooklyn, Mount St. Mary's, Robert Morris, Sacred Heart, St. Francis Brooklyn, Saint Francis U and Wagner. For more information on the NEC, visit the league's official website (www.northeastconference.org) and digital network (www.necfrontrow.com), or follow the league on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Google+, all @NECsports.