

Northeast Conference

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NEC Baseball Coaches Tab Wagner Preseason No. 1

Seahawks Beat Out Defending NEC Tournament Champion Monmouth for Top Billing

Somerset, NJ -- Wagner won a plurality of first-place votes to finish atop the 2010 Northeast Conference Baseball Preseason Coaches Poll. The league office released the results of the annual survey as a prelude to its 24th season on the diamond.

Flying high following the program's first ever regular season conference crown last spring, the Seahawks received four top nods to finish one spot in front of defending NEC Tournament champion Monmouth and its two first-place votes.

"It is a great honor to be picked first by the NEC coaches. Our conference has gotten better each and every year and I feel that there are several teams that deserve the top ranking," said Wagner's Joe Litterio, the reigning NEC Coach of the Year.

Finishing in the same position it held at the conclusion of the 2009 regular season schedule, Central Connecticut State, which earned a pair of top nods, took third. Sacred Heart received the lone first-place vote and finished fourth. Set for its first season as a Northeast Conference member, Bryant finished fifth, one place ahead of 2008 NEC champion Mount St. Mary's. Quinnipiac took seventh with Fairleigh Dickinson and Long Island rounding out the survey results in eighth and ninth, respectively.

The top four finishers in the preseason poll were the same four teams that comprised the 2009 NEC Tournament field. The 32-game conference schedule that lies ahead will determine who will be on hand when the 2010 Northeast Conference Championship unfolds from May 27-30 at TD Bank Ballpark in Bridgewater, New Jersey.

It's been a banner 12 months for **Wagner (31-21, 17-9 NEC)**. The Seahawks topped the single-season school record for wins for a second consecutive year last May, captured their first-ever NEC title of any kind, and saw recent graduate Andrew Bailey, now a closer for the Oakland A's, win the American League Rookie of the Year award. Hoping to keep the good times rolling, the Seahawks lost only four letter winners from last year's 31-win team. They return their top eight hitters, all of whom batted over .300. Junior outfielder **Jared Guccio (Landisville, NJ/Buena Regional)** was the NEC's second-leading hitter (.394) last season. Junior shortstop Brian Martutartus (Carlsbad, CA/La Costa Canyon) batted .366 and slugged .529. Senior **Damian Csakai (Freehold, NJ/Freehold)** will look for his third consecutive all-NEC selection after totaling a team-high 66 hits and a league-leading 37 stolen bases. Back for his senior season, first baseman **Vin Avella (Matawan, NJ/CBA)** hits for both average (.307) and power (16 HR, 48 RBI).

Some uncertainty surrounds the pitching staff, except for the return of NEC Pitcher of the Year **Matt Watson (Howell, NJ/Howell)**. Set for his senior season, the 6-foot-3 right-hander led the NEC in earned-run average (3.64) and win-loss record (9-2) last year. Watson couldn't have been much better in conference play, posting a perfect 7-0 record and league-low 3.02 ERA against NEC opponents.

2010 Northeast Conference Baseball Preseason Coaches Poll

1. Wagner (4)
2. Monmouth (2)
3. Central Connecticut State (2)
4. Sacred Heart (1)
5. Bryant
6. Mount St. Mary's
7. Quinnipiac
8. Fairleigh Dickinson
9. Long Island

First place votes in parentheses ().

(2010 NEC Baseball Preseason Poll Release; 1-of-3)

Bryant University (2012-13) • Central Connecticut State University • Fairleigh Dickinson University
Long Island University • Monmouth University • Mount St. Mary's University
Quinnipiac University • Robert Morris University • Sacred Heart University
St. Francis (NY) College • Saint Francis (PA) University • Wagner College

Monmouth (32-25, 15-11 NEC) did not finish atop the regular season standings like last year's coaches poll predicted, but validated its preseason No. 1 ranking by capturing a second NEC Tournament title in three years. Head coach **Dean Ehehalt's** Hawks tallied league highs in runs (445) runs and hits (636) last season, but loses the right side of an infield that featured second team all-NEC first baseman Paul Bottigliero (17 HR, 58 RBI) and NEC Tournament MVP Chris Collazo (.376, 46 RBI, 57 R). Junior Nick **Pulsonetti (Old Tappan, NJ/Northern Valley Regional)**, the Hawks second-leading hitter last season (.355, 11 HR, 53 RBI) returns as do a pair of .320 hitters in junior Ryan Terry (Levittown, PA/Truman) and sophomore outfielder David Jacob (Sussex, NJ/Vernon). Jacob was one of three freshmen to make key contributions during the Hawks' title quest. Sophomore Jamie Rosenkranz (Oakhurst, NJ/Ocean) took over the starting shortstop job midway through the season while outfielder Josh Boyd (Port Murray, NJ/West Morris Central) made the most starts (52) amongst MU rookies, batting .289 with 31 RBI and 41 runs scored.

Monmouth suffered significant losses in the pitching department when Ryan Buch and Brett Brach, two of the NEC's top-five ERA leaders, were drafted. Senior southpaws **Kyle Breese (Monmouth Jct., NJ/South Brunswick)** and **Nick Vallillo (Old Tappan, NJ/Northern Valley Regional)**, who combined for an 8-5 record last season, are the team's two most-experienced starters while sophomore righty **Matt Goitz (Hawthorne, NJ/Hawthorne)** looks to build on the masterful 4.1 innings he tossed when his team needed it most during last year's NEC Championship Game.

Central Connecticut State (26-22, 16-11 NEC) welcomes back four of its five all-NEC honorees from last season, including both Blue Devils selected to the First Team. Senior shortstop **Anthony Scialdone (West Hartford, CT/Hall)** batted .351 over 41 games and was responsible for the league's longest hitting streak in 2009. Junior designated hitter **Pat Epps (Waterford, CT/Waterford)** drove in a team-high 51 runs in 48 games. The Blue Devils return plenty of offensive firepower from a team that led the NEC in batting average (.323), but head coach **Charlie Hickey**, whose team has qualified for the NEC Tournament in each of the past four seasons, lost three key elements to his starting staff. Senior righty **Dan Markoya (Carbondale, CO/Otero JC)**, who surrendered only one long ball in 52.1 innings, is the lone returnee.

Sacred Heart (29-27-1, 16-10 NEC) came within two wins of the NEC title last season, but now head coach **Nick Giaquinto** must find a way to compensate for the graduation of his three most-productive hitters (in terms of average). Senior catcher **Jeff Heppner (Aqubogue, NY/Riverhead)**, a first team all-NEC backstop, provided the Pioneers' lineup with a power surge in 2009 when he hit 13 round-trippers and drove in a league-best 63 runs. He will serve as a team captain in 2010 along with senior lefty **Jared Balbach (Pine Bush, NY/Pine Bush)** who went 8-2 with a 4.32 ERA as the ace of the staff.

Bryant (32-22, Independent) performed rather remarkably in its first season playing a full Division I schedule. The Bulldogs won nine of their first 12 games, which included a single mid-week win over Virginia Tech and weekend series victories over Richmond and James Madison. Fifth-year head coach Jamie Pinzino's team played a pair of four-game series against NEC members Monmouth and Long Island, splitting with the former and sweeping the latter. Bryant returns both pitching ace **Eric Polvani (Wallingford, CT/Sheehan)**, who went 8-2 with a 2.04 ERA as a junior, and leading hitter **Jeff Vigurs (South Windsor, CT/South Windsor)**, a veteran backstop who batted .389 with 23 doubles, nine homers, and 70 RBI.

One year after winning it all, **Mount St. Mary's (23-25, 15-11 NEC)** missed out of the NEC Tournament by virtue of a tiebreaker. Looking to mount a comeback, Scott Thomson's club has a core of dynamic players returning in 2010. Junior outfielder **Shane Eyler (Taneytown, MD/Francis Scott Key)** headlines the list. The only underclassman to win the NEC Player of the Year award last decade, Eyler batted a team-best .380. In 26 games against NEC pitching, he belted 12 home runs and slugged .889. Junior catcher **Kyle Kane (Boonsboro, MD/Boonsboro)** showed his ability to handle a pitching staff while also contributing offensively (.321 avg., .401 OBP). Sophomores **Brady Feigl (Severn, MD/Old Mill)**, a lefty hurler, and **Buddy Fields (Manassas, VA/Stonewall Jackson)**, an outfielder/pitcher, both contributed significantly as rookies. The former struck out 69 batter in 62.1 innings while the latter batted .303 over 37 appearances.

Quinnipiac (18-34, 11-17 NEC) will look to end its two-year absence from the NEC Tournament with veteran skipper **Dan Gooley** set for his ninth season at the helm. The Bobcats will feature a brand new starting staff with the exception of senior **Michael Oskandy (Bethel, CT/Bethel)**. Despite losing his top arms, Gooley welcomes back the team's two leading hitters from a year ago. Sophomore **Gabe Guerino (Milford, CT/West Haven)** led all NEC rookies with a .349 batting average while veteran centerfielder **Brian Monack (Branford, CT/Branford)** complimented his sensational defense with a .315 average and nine homers.

Fairleigh Dickinson (16-34, 11-17 NEC) looks to turn the corner in **Jerry De Fabbia's** sixth season in Teaneck. The Knights have improved both their overall and NEC win totals in each of the past two seasons and welcome back an exciting sophomore. Second baseman **Matt Holsman (Coral Springs, FL/Stoneman Douglas)** stepped right into a starting role and batted .323 over 50 games, 49 of which were starts. Senior infielder **Zachary Sand (San Diego, CA/Mission Bay)** is also back after posting team highs in batting average (.379) and RBI (38).

Long Island (10-40, 6-21 NEC) lost the dynamic James Jones to the Seattle Mariners in the fourth round round of the MLB Draft. It won't be easy for head coach **Don Maines** to find a replacement for the all-NEC utility player who did just about everything. The Blackbirds appear to be rebuilding around pitching as Maines has signed eight freshmen arms for the upcoming season. They'll be throwing to one of the NEC's top backstops in senior **Chris Kievit (Wayne, NJ/Don Bosco Prep)**, a .303 hitter who led the team in RBI (41).