

Baseball (2004): Panthers Conclude 2004 Season

PANTHER BASEBALL CONCLUDES 2004 SEASON

The 2004 University of Northern Iowa baseball team came into the season with high hopes, primarily because of a strong pitching staff and a chance to make an offensive threat. But an early season-ending injury to the team's power hitter and the loss of two of its four starting pitchers down the stretch made it difficult for the Panthers to make the league tournament. They finished with an overall record of 25-31 and 12-20 and in a three-way tie for fifth place in the Missouri Valley Conference, just missing post-season play.

When reviewing the season, the Panthers' pitching staff has a lot to be proud of with an ERA of 4.84. This is the best earned run average for a UNI staff since 1981, when the team turned Division I and had a 4.72 ERA in 240.1 innings. Micah Christensen stepped up his play as he moved from a closer to a starter. The senior finished with a 5-1 record and a 3.99 ERA in 49.2 innings. He also led the team with a season-high 56 strikeouts, this coming from a player who had won his first collegiate game last season. Junior Kory Kelchen and senior Bill Zenk both did a great job of keeping the Panthers in the games as starting pitchers. Sophomores Jake Hansen and Zach Jevne at times were the team's number one starter, until both of them went down with arm injuries at the end of the year.

In the bullpen, UNI always could rely on junior Eric DeJong. In his first season with the team, he had a 2.91 ERA in 55.2 innings and an overall record of 4-3. His opponents hit a mere .220 when he was on the mound. Sophomore Drew Wold also had a great season out of the pen as the Panther closer. In his 21 innings, he had four saves and gave up just three earned runs for a 1.29 ERA. He gave up his first earned run on May 11 against #23 Nebraska.

Offensively, the Panthers struggled at times, but when the final pitch was thrown, they had five players who hit over .300. Senior Armando Lara led the team with a .344 average, including nine doubles, two triples and three home runs, two of which were grand slams. Dan Grant led the team with eight home runs and finished his senior season with a .342 batting average, despite dealing with a bad hamstring.

For the second straight season, UNI had a fielding percentage of .964, the best since becoming Division I and the second best in school history. As a team, it finished with 51 double plays, 10 shy of the school record of 61.

UNI started out the season, like they do many years, on the road with its first 22 games. The first time the team had an opportunity to play on grass was on Feb. 27 when it opened up at McNeese State. During the first weekend of play, the three Panther starters gave up just three runs, despite dropping two of the three games. UNI struggled offensively the following weekend and lost the three-game series at Arkansas State.

The next stop for the team was a 10-day trip to Bradenton, FL, where it played eight games. Opening up with Lehigh, UNI came out strong with four runs in the first inning and three in the third to win 10-5. Against Vermont on March 14, the Panthers not only dominated offensively with 12 runs, but the pitching staff gave up just four hits and did not allow a run in the team's first shut out since the 2002 MVC Tournament game against Creighton. The story was nearly the same the following day when they played Columbia. UNI led 8-0 heading into the bottom of the eighth, but gave up a run. It finished with 20 hits and the 9-1 victory. It finished its time down in the Sunshine State scoring 61 runs to its opponents' 34.

The Panthers headed into their first MVC game on a three-game winning streak, but they had to face nationally ranked Wichita State. The Shockers came into the week ranked seventh in the nation. After tough losses to Long Beach State, they were ready to fight back. UNI could not get anything going and it lost its first shutout in 196 games, 8-0, against WSU with just three hits. The streak dated back to April 28, 2000, when Indiana State won 8-0. The Panthers finished the four-game series without a win and recorded just 18 hits and six runs.

Looking for their first Valley victory, they headed to Illinois State. Again, they struggled to get things going offensively and were shutout 7-0 in game one. With the wind blowing on day two, UNI pounded out 17 hits and 13 runs for the 13-11 victory with two home runs. Down 2-1 heading into the series finale, the Panthers had a great outing by starting pitcher Hansen. The sophomore southpaw threw a complete game one hit shutout with a career-high 12 strikeouts and UNI won 3-0. For his accomplishments, he was named the conference Pitcher of the Week.

After six weeks on the road, the Panthers played in front of a home crowd at Riverfront Stadium against Minnesota on April 7. They trailed 6-1 heading into the bottom of the fourth inning, but never gave up and rallied back to tie the game in the seventh. Lara came up big in the bottom of the 10th with a walk-off home run on a 2-2 count to give UNI the 7-6 come from behind victory.

Southwest Missouri State was UNI's first home conference series and things looked bright as it defeated the Bears 3-2 in game one, but the Panthers' bats didn't come out again until Sunday. They ended up dropping the last three games to the 2003 MVC champions.

Three days later, UNI took its first of three games against Iowa. In the first game on April 14, despite trailing 6-4 going into the eighth inning, it pulled away with the 8-6 victory. Then on April 21, the two teams faced each other in the First Annual Corridor Classic held

at Veterans Stadium in Cedar Rapids, IA. The Panthers were down 1-0 heading into the third inning, but two runs in the third and three in the fourth gave them the push they needed to defeat the Hawkeyes 8-3 in front of 2,098 fans. UNI then went on to sweep its intra-state rivals with the 9-8 victory at home.

The Panthers headed to Indiana State (April 23-25) in what proved to be a very important weekend down the stretch. They dominated game one with 15 hits and 13 runs in the 13-5 victory. The rain fell all day Saturday and they lost two very close games, including giving up the winning run in the bottom of the seventh for the 4-3 Sycamore victory. UNI trailed again in the series finale, but fought back only to lose 5-4.

It split its series at home against Creighton, including a complete game by Zenk. The senior threw nine innings and gave up just two hits and one run in the 3-1 victory. He was named the Pitcher of the Week for the second time during the season, his first after his Vermont victory. The next week, the Panthers concluded their MVC road trips with a split at Bradley. They came away with a pair of victories in a double header, which was the first on the year. They were still in the MVC race as they concluded the last two league series at home.

Before facing Evansville on May 14, they traveled to Lincoln, NE, to play two against #23 Nebraska. The Huskers dominated the first game, but in the second game, the Panthers came out to play. Zenk had a good start, giving up just three hits, and the pitching staff gave up just five hits on the day, despite losing 5-2.

The team needed to have a big weekend against the Purple Aces and things looked good with the 6-4 victory on Friday. In the first game of the double header, the game was tied up at five heading into extra innings when the Aces scored to win 6-5. UNI lost the next game 6-2 in the seventh before pounding away a 14-3 victory on Sunday. Before concluding the regular season with Southern Illinois, it traveled to Minnesota where it defeated the Big 10 champs for the second time on the year, 14-4.

The final weekend of the regular season was anything but normal and the Panthers knew that they needed to win at least two games and possibly more to make the tournament. Things started out well with a 3-2 come from behind win and then things got interesting. After three and a half innings in the seven-inning game, the rain came along with tornado warnings. Both teams and the fans took cover and after the rain stopped, UNI had to make the field ready to play. That included bailing 4,000 gallons of water out of each dugout and cleaning up the warning track. After five and a half hours, the game resumed. Despite trailing 1-0, starter Christensen came back on the mound and pulled away with the 3-2 victory. After seven hours and 20 minutes, the first game concluded and both teams decided to play two the next day.

The Panthers came back later that night to clean up again and bail out another 4,000 gallons of water from the dugouts. The first game was a pitchers' dual with a scoreless game into the ninth inning. The Salukis came up with a run and won the game 1-0. In the final game, UNI came out first with a run and the game was tied at two heading into extra innings. SIU scored three in the 10th and some mental mistakes cost the Panthers the victory, 5-2.

After the game was over and fans went home, the team found out that because of a three-way tie with Evansville and Indiana State, it would not make the Valley Tournament. A composite record between the tied teams determines a multiple-tie and UNI finished with a 3-5 combined record against the teams, while ISU was 5-3 and UE was 4-4.

DeJong led the team in conference honors as he was named second team all-MVC as a relief pitcher, while seniors Sean LaCoste, Grant and Lara, along with sophomore [Pat Moran](#), all were named honorable mention all-conference. LaCoste and Zenk both graduated in May and their success in the classroom and

on the field led them to be honorable mention all-MVC Scholar Athletes.

The year concluded the way it began with injuries, but head coach [Rick Heller](#) was not disappointed because his team never gave up. He is excited about next year with the pitchers that he has returning in Wold, DeJong, Kelchen, Hansen and Jevne, along with a strong middle infield in Moran and [Jose Guzman](#).

YOU WILL BE MISSED: The Panthers honored nine seniors who finished their career with the Panthers this season. Their contributions both on and off the field are greatly appreciated. Good luck Spencer Black, Joe Burgett, Micah Christensen, Dan Grant, Nate Heath, Sean LaCoste, Armando Lara, Seth Moulton and Bill Zenk.

UNI FIVE...BIG TEN ZERO: The Panthers found success this season against their Big 10 opponents with a 5-0 record. The first time they met was on April 7, as UNI defeated the Gophers 7-6 on a walk-off home run by Armando Lara in the 10th inning. Then on May 18th, they pounded Minnesota 14-4. UNI also swept Iowa in the three-game series 8-6, 8-3 and 9-8.

FIRST START...FIRST WIN: With his parents visiting from Florida, freshman Robert Rodriguez earned the start against Minnesota (May 18). In his four innings, he struck out two and shut down the Gophers in the second and third innings. Entering into the game, he had thrown just 12 innings. He finished the year with a record of 1-1 in 16 innings on the mound.

AND THE CROWD GOES WILD: When Jim Bauer stepped on the mound in the eighth inning against Minnesota (May 18), the crowd went wild, or at least the 20-25 fans that came to watch the sophomore pitch. A native of Apple Valley, MN, a suburb of Minneapolis, his family and friends saw the right-hander pitch outstanding. In the six batters he faced, he struck out four of them and did not allow a hit in his appearance.

MONDO MADNESS: Armando Lara was named MVC Player of the Week on May 17. The senior finished the week with a .474 batting average in the team's six games. He had nine hits, including three doubles and a grand slam, for a total of nine runs batted in. He also was 2-for-2 in stolen bases and finished the week walking three times and being hit by a pitch once. Against Evansville, the right fielder hit .538, including a near perfect day on Saturday going 4-5. But his biggest day came on Sunday when he went 2-for-3 with six RBIs. With the Panthers leading 10-3 in the bottom of the seventh, he hit a walk-off grand slam to give UNI the 14-3 win.

HAVE NO FEAR, DEJONG IS HERE: Junior Eric DeJong dominated his opponents in relief this year. May 11-16 the right-handed pitcher threw 5.2 innings in three appearances. Against Evansville on Friday, he pitched three innings for his second save. In that game, he gave up just one hit and struck out three batters. In his three outings, he gave up just three hits and one walk while striking out four. His opponents batted a mere .150 and he gave up no earned runs.

OUCH!: UNI finished the year being hit by a pitch 71 times including eight times against Evansville on May 16. Jose Guzman, Dan Grant and Ryan Norman were hit twice in the game. Seth Moulton led the team in hit by a pitch with 16, ranking him third place in school history. Last season, the Panthers were hit 75 times.

GOING BACK TO CALI: Armando Lara knows when to step up his play. In the 14-3 victory over Evansville (May 16), the San Diego, CA, native hit his third home run of the season, a walk-off grand slam. This was the senior's second grand slam of the season along with his second walk-off home run. His first grand slam came against Wright State on March 20 and his first walk-off home run came on April 7 against Minnesota in extra innings.

WELCOME BACK NORM: Freshman Ryan Norman spent a month out of the lineup due to an injury. The Spirit Lake, IA, native made his first start in the second game against Bradley on May 8 and finished the year on fire. Over the his first nine games, he is batting .452 (14-for-31) with two doubles, three home runs and seven RBIs. Against #23 Nebraska, he hit his first collegiate home run and had his second at home against Evansville (May 16) and his third at Minnesota on May 18. In the series finale with the Purple Aces, he was a triple shy of the cycle. He finished the day going 3-for-3 with three runs scored, an RBI and being hit by a pitch twice.

THE WHEELS WERE TURNING: Sean LaCoste and Ryan Norman both had a great game in the series finale against Evansville (May 16). Both Panthers had a single, a double, a home run and were hit by a pitch. They only needed a triple to complete the cycle. LaCoste drove in two runs and scored four runs, while Norman scored three times with one RBI.

WHAT A WAY TO GO OUT: Senior Joe Burgett had 87 at bats under his hat before he hit his first home run of the season against Bradley (5/1). His blast was definitely one to remember. With a 1-1 count and a runner on first, the Panther outfielder had a bomb that not only went out of the field, but after dropping nearly 450 feet, it bounced out of the park. A passing car tossed the ball back in. Last season, he finished with four home runs.

FORMER CLOSER COMPLETES GAME: In just his third collegiate start, senior Micah Christensen threw his first complete game. In the seventh inning of the double header against Bradley, the right-handed pitcher gave up just three hits and struck out his career high as a Panther with seven. In the 9-2, victory he gave up just one earned run in the 29 batters he faced. He finished the season with an overall record of 5-1 and a team high 56 strikeouts.

SORE KNEES: Nate Trumm is in his second year as the Panthers' number one catcher, but this season the sophomore has spent a lot of time behind the plate. In the team's 56 games, the Worthington, IA, native has started 48 and played in 53. Before the game with Nebraska on May 12, the last time he was out of the starting lineup was April 10 against Southwest Missouri State, which was 20 straight games. Tyler Jefferson had been out of the lineup with an injury.

THOSE SHOES AREN'T MADE FOR WALKING: The UNI pitching staff allowed just 161 walks on the season, averaging out to

2.9 per game. This was the lowest average since the Panthers turned Division I in 1981. The previous mark was 3.4 walks a game back in 1995, while the highest walk average was in 1989 when UNI walked 4.9 batters a game. Four times this season, including the 9-8 victory over Iowa, the Panthers have not allowed a walk.

MVC SCHOLAR ATHLETE: Senior Bill Zenk was named the Missouri Valley Conference Male Scholar of the Week on May 3. With a 3.26 GPA in Marketing, the southpaw threw a complete game, giving up just two hits in the 3-1 victory over Creighton. He had a career-high 11 strikeouts.

ZENK INKS COMPLETE GAME: With some injuries in the starting rotation, senior Bill Zenk got the call to start in the final game of the series with Creighton. It was the first time in 20 games that the Vinton, IA, native started for the Panthers. The southpaw had a no hitter in 4.2 innings of work and in the nine-inning complete game, he gave up just two hits and struck out a career-high 11 batters. This season, he finished with a 5-4 with a 5.11 ERA. For his accomplishments, he was named the MVC Pitcher of the Week, the second time this season.

MAKING IT COUNT: Sophomore Drew Wold did a great job as UNI's closer this year. The southpaw finished the year with four saves, ranking him in a tie for sixth place in school history. The single season record is 10 set by Matt Cobb in 1999. He had 22 appearances with a record of 3-4 in 58.2 innings. Wold had a record of 1-2 in 21 appearances and in 21 innings on the mound gave up just three earned runs for a 1.29 ERA.

WATCH WHERE YOU'RE GOING: The Panthers picked off 11 batters this year, including eight against Valley opponents. Against Creighton, UNI picked off two Bluejays runners. In game one, Kory Kelchen caught Matt Hammer leaning at first and in the final game, catcher Nate Trumm threw down to first to pick off Gabe Lapito.

SWEEPING UP THE HAWKS: UNI had its brooms out on April 28 against Iowa. The Panthers swept the Hawkeyes in the three-game series, including the 9-8 victory last week. Armando Lara went 3-4 on the night with three RBIs, while Jose Guzman had his second home run as a Panther. Earning the victory was Jake Hansen with seven strikeouts, while Spencer Black received the save.

TAKING THE LEAD: UNI successfully stole 78 bases on the year. Against Indiana State, the team stole seven bags, six of them coming in the 13-5 victory on Friday night. Armando Lara led the team in steals with 23-of-24 on the season.

NOW STARTING: In Micah Christensen's collegiate career, he has been known as a closer. This season, he has spent most of the year as the set up man, but April 26 against Indiana State, the senior earned his first start. The Elma, IA, native threw five innings, then his career longest. Against Creighton, he made his second start, pitching six innings, while holding the Bluejays scoreless until the sixth. Last season, he recorded his first collegiate victory and finished this year with a 5-1 mark.

CALIFORNIA DREAMING: When looking over the UNI roster, most of the players live within driving distance from Cedar Falls. Most hail from Iowa. Over the past few years, the Panthers had numerous players from the state of California and this year is no exception. The team had three players from California and another that recently moved to Iowa from there. Armando Lara is from San Diego, Nate Heath is a native of Temecula, and Jose Guzman hails from El Monte. Joe Burgett went to high school in Mission Viejo before his family moved to Des Moines, IA, a few years ago.

DOUBLING UP: In UNI's 18-7 victory over Rockhurst, the team tallied eight doubles. Ryan Fulton and Sean LaCoste both had two on the day. The school record for doubles is 11 set by the 2001 team against Air Force on March 2, 2001. The last time the Panthers had eight doubles in a game was on April 7, 2000, against Iowa.

AN EASTER SOUVENIR : Sophomore Nate Trumm will remember Easter of 2004 after hitting his first collegiate home run. With the Panthers down 3-1 and teammate Seth Moulton on first, the Worthington, IA, native hit a blast over the right field fence on a 1-0 count. The two-run shot tied the game at three. He finished the day going 2-for-4 with three RBIs, including his fifth double of the season.

DOUBLE DIPPING: Senior Dan Grant had a game he will forever remember against Minnesota on April 14. The Thunder Bay, Ont., native went 3-for-5 with two home runs and four RBI. When he hit his second home run, he felt a sense of relief, as it was the first time he has ever had two blasts in one game. The last Panther to do that was Adam Boeve against Southern Illinois last season.

MANDO MASHES HOME VICTORY: Senior Armando Lara found a great time to hit his second home run as a Panther. With the game tied at six against Minnesota (April 14), the San Diego, CA, native hit a walk-off home run in the 10th inning to give UNI the win, 7-6. The last time UNI had a walk-off home run was by Terry Reiners in 2001.

HOME SWEET HOME: UNI was excited about playing at Waterloo Riverfront Stadium. The Panthers started out the first six weeks of the season having to play 22 games on the road. They started out at McNeese State in Louisiana, traveled to Arkansas State for three, played eight games in Florida in nine days, opened up the MVC season at national powerhouse Wichita State and concluded the road trip at Illinois State.

VALLEY PITCHER OF THE WEEK: Sophomore Jake Hansen was unstoppable in the final game of the series at Illinois State. The southpaw threw a one-hit, complete game shutout with an unbelievable 12 strikeouts in the 3-0 victory. The native of Council Bluffs, IA, had six innings when he faced just three batters and had at least one strikeout in seven of his nine innings on the mound. The Redbirds didn't know how to get a hold of the ball as he sent 11 of his 12 strikeouts down swinging. He finished the game throwing 120 pitches with 75 of them being strikes. For his accomplishments, he was named MVC Pitcher of the Week.

JAKE'S GEM: One-hitters and 12 strikeouts don't happen all that often and on April 4, sophomore Jake Hansen proved that. The last time a UNI pitcher had at least 10 strikeouts in a game was Nic Ungs against Wichita State on May 16, 2001. The last time a Panther threw a complete game shut out was Kory Kelchen against Creighton on May 23, 2002. This was the southpaw's first shutout as a Panther and his second complete game. He threw a complete seven-inning game at Evansville last season in the 15-3 victory.

THE STREAK ENDS AT 196: The Panthers had their longest streak come to an end at #7 Wichita State (3/26). UNI had 196 consecutive games of not being shut out by its opponents, but on Friday night, the Shockers were able to shut out the Panthers 8-0 and on Saturday came away with the 10-0 victory in the game determined by the 10-run rule. The streak dated back to April 28, 2000, when Indiana State shut out UNI 8-0.

MAGNIFICENT MORAN: During UNI's eight games in Florida, sophomore Pat Moran hit .485. He led the team offensively down south with 16 hits, a double, seven RBIs and four walks and was 2-of-3 in stolen bases. During that time, he had six multiple hits, including three hits twice.

VERMONT SEES DOUBLE AGAIN: Over the past three years, UNI has faced Vermont in Florida and all three times the Panthers were victorious. This year, Sean LaCoste was the Panther to deflate the Catamounts. The senior had three hits in the game, with all of them being doubles. The last time a UNI player had three doubles in a game was Alex Dvorsky on March 16, 2002, against, of all teams, Vermont.

BAUER'S BACK: After recovering from Tommy John's Surgery, Jim Bauer found himself on the mound during the game against Columbia (3/15). The right-handed pitcher threw the ninth inning with his first two pitches called strikes. The native of Apple Valley, MN, struck out his first batter and gave up just one hit in his appearance.

IVERSON VICTORIOUS: Junior transfer Brett Iverson earned his first start in the Purple and Gold against Fairleigh Dickinson (3/18). A native of Eagle Grove, IA, he threw five innings with two strikeouts and one walk in the 7-2 victory. He finished the year with a record of 1-1 and a 5.40 ERA in nine innings on the mound after being sidelined with an arm injury.

WELCOME HOME: True freshman Robert Rodriguez returned back to his home state of Florida Mar 12. In his first appearance as a Panther, he threw three innings in relief against Lehigh. The native of Hialeah, FL, struck out three batters and gave up two hits gaining his first save.

PITCHER OF THE WEEK: Senior Bill Zenk had a great outing against Vermont, throwing seven innings in UNI's first shut out in over a year. In the 22 batters he faced, he allowed just three hits, walked only one and struck out three batters. In his first victory this season, he threw 76 pitches, 54 of them being strikes. For his accomplishments, he was named the Missouri Valley Conference Pitcher of the Week on March 15.

SHUT OUT THE LIGHTS: UNI had its first shutout in 64 games when it defeated Vermont 12-0 on March 14. Bill Zenk, Zach Jevne and Micah Christensen combined for the Panthers' nine-inning shutout. The last time UNI threw a shutout was when then freshman Kory Kelchen threw a complete game against Creighton at the MVC Tournament in 2002 for the 4-0 victory.

OH, CANADA: When you think about Canada, the first thing that comes to mind might be hockey, but for two Panthers, baseball is what they imagine. Senior Dan Grant and sophomore Tyler Jefferson are both natives of Canada. Grant is an infielder from Thunder Bay, Ontario, while Jefferson, a catcher, hails from Langley, British Columbia.

MVC POLLS: After earning their third straight trip to the Missouri Valley Conference Tournament and a 2003 conference mark of 16-15, the Panthers were picked fifth in the MVC preseason poll with 53 points. Wichita State was picked to win with seven first place votes.

No. Team (First-Place) Points

1. Wichita State (7) 81
2. Southern Illinois 74
3. SMS (1) 72
4. Illinois State 56
- 5. UNI 53**
6. Creighton 43
- Indiana State (1) 43
8. Evansville 41
9. Bradley 22

SURF THE WEB: The latest press releases, statistics, schedules and results for all UNI sports are available on the UNI Athletics home page. Updated daily, the new site is located at <http://www.unipanthers.com>. Panther fans also can follow what is going on in the Missouri Valley Conference at <http://www.mvc.org>.

QUOTING COACH HELLER: Head coach Rick Heller made the following comments following the 2004 season.

“Basically the way the season started, with fighting injuries, is how it ended. All season long whenever we got close, winning three or four games, two more guys would go down. We had some close losses and we were not able to overcome that adversity. I am not disappointed on the way the kids fought. I thought they played real hard and fought to the end. Unfortunately, we just came up short.

“This was the year where we thought our pitching was the strength of our team and I think it proved all season long as we had guys that had very good years. Guys like Drew Wold and Eric DeJong did a nice job. Those were two guys that gave us quality innings out of the bullpen, that we hadn’t had in the past. Micah Christensen really stepped up and pitched well as a starter for us. We had to take him out of the bullpen. Kory Kelchen had a better year than he had last year. He really fought hard for us and we are looking for him to have an even better year next season. Bill Zenk stepped up for us and pitched some really big games down the stretch. Overall, our whole staff gave us a chance most days and that is all we ask.

“At this point we are all excited and looking forward to next year. We feel with Clayton Daniels back and the recruiting class we have along with the pitching staff that we will have next year, that we should have a chance to become a very good team. We had four redshirt pitchers last year and we will return Kory Kelchen, Jake Hansen, Zack Jevne, Eric DeJong and Drew Wold and we are pretty excited about that. We thought with our recruiting class we really improved our offense and will have our middle back with Pat Moran and Jose Guzman. We should be set to have a real nice year and be even deeper than we were this year. Every team has the injury situation, but ours was a little worse than most. Our depth was not very good at certain positions and that really hurt us offensively. Not many teams can overcome two of their top four pitchers in the last month of the season.

“For the most part I thought our guys played hard and played good defense all season. We got better each and every day, but I wish things had ended a little differently. I felt like as crazy of a year that it was if we would have made it to the conference tournament we still had a chance to win it.”