

THE Game Changers

When rebooting a program, coaches seek out student-athlete power players like Augustana seniors Traci Fransen and Nate Baumann.

Viking softball and baseball were floundering when Traci Fransen and Nate Baumann arrived in the fall of 2007. Both carried impressive high school credentials, and both were activated immediately.

Viking softball and baseball had more losses than wins in the spring of 2008. The results have been reversed each of the last two seasons and, in 2011, the potential for post-season appearances for both programs is genuine.

With the numbers they've put up, Fransen and Baumann have more than delivered on their expectations. Both are billed as "players to watch" in the Northern Sun Intercollegiate Conference (NSIC) preseason coaches' polls. Both said there is work to be done before graduating in May and they are eager to get on the field.

Traci Fransen

An all-state catcher at Jackson County Central High School, Fransen helped the Huskies to Minnesota Class AA championships in 2004 and 2005. But Augustana coach Gretta Melsted saw her skills better

suiting for the corners.

"I was at first base for a time, then switched to third base where I've been ever since," Fransen said. "I was willing to go wherever needed."

Adjusting to the infield wasn't Fransen's only challenge that first spring; she also came face-to-face with a rare losing season.

"It was a transition period for the team and we concentrated on working together," she said. "It was all part of a building process to get us to where we are today."

The Vikings have come a distance since the 17-28 showing in 2008. After improving to 31-23 in 2009, Augustana was 46-14 a year ago and won its first NSIC regular season championship. Fransen contributed to the rise by increasing her batting average and home run production each season.

"This team has put in the work ... I'm excited to get the season started."

**Traci Fransen,
Senior Softball Player**

She is a two-time All-NSIC first team choice. Last year she was selected to the Louisville Slugger/National Fastpitch Coaches Association (NFCA) All-Central Region first team, and was the NFCA's national player of the week for April 19-25. She had the second highest batting average on the team (.382), posted the highest slugging percentage (.707), and was the home run leader (15).

"It's been fun to watch Traci develop into the player she has become," Melsted said. "She has turned into a scary, scary hitter who can literally change the course of a game with one swing. She is one of the best hitters and all-around players in the Northern Sun. It has been a pleasure to coach her, not just because of her athletic talent, but, more importantly, because she is the





Traci Fransen



Nate Baumann

type of person you want representing your program.”

It has been 20 years since Augustana won the NCAA Division II softball championship. Despite having just two seniors on the roster, the Vikings field an experienced team in 2011. It’s a unit Fransen believes has national tournament potential.

“Definitely,” she said without hesitation. “This team has put in the work and, with the desire to succeed, we all feel it’s an achievable goal. I’m really excited to get the season started.”

An elementary/special education major, Fransen is an Academic All-NSIC selection and plans to teach and coach.

Nate Baumann

He has been an all-conference first-team choice for three seasons. He was the lone freshman named to the last All-North Central Conference team in 2008. His two appearances on the All-NSIC team include Player of the Year honors in 2010. He was also an All-Central Region first team choice as well as a second team selection on two All-America squads.

Baumann was behind the plate his freshman year at Augustana. In a move to protect his knees and speed, Coach Tim Huber placed him in the outfield. “I’ve been all right with it,” Baumann said.

In another move to capitalize on his skills,

“We had a good finish a year ago ... and we have the credentials to back it up. I’m as excited as I’ve ever been.”

Nate Baumann, Senior Baseball Player

Baumann was placed at the top of the batting order in 2010. He delivered by hitting .441, scoring a team-leading 79 runs, and topping the stolen bases chart with 40. “I think coach trusted me to do the right thing. It took a little getting used to, but it worked out,” Baumann said.

“Nate gives us a unique aspect of power and speed that you just don’t see at this level of college baseball,” Huber said. “The numbers he has put up in three years are amazing.”

In 2010, the Vikings set a school record for wins with 34. Baumann led the NSIC in batting (.476), slugging percentage (.857), and runs scored (55). Earning the conference player of the year award came as a surprise since the Vikings missed the league playoffs. “Winning the award was nice, but at the same time bittersweet,” Baumann said. “I would give it back in a heartbeat for a conference championship.”

Augustana has posted winning seasons each of the last two years. In 2010 the Vikings won 11 of their last 13 games, including the final six. With most of the

lineup intact, the Vikings have been tabbed to finish fourth in the league this spring.

“A lot of us have been here a long time,” Baumann said. “We had a good finish a year ago and set a lot of records, but not one person is satisfied because we missed the playoffs. I think the strong finish will carry over and we have the credentials to back it up. I’m as excited as I’ve ever been.”

In light of all the success in 2010, Huber hopes his senior co-captain will not demand too much of himself. “If he just lets his talents take care of things he will no doubt have another outstanding year. We have some very talented offensive players around him; he must understand he doesn’t need to try and do it all himself.”

Baumann, a psychology and English major from Marshall, Minn., is an Academic All-NSIC student. He hopes playing professionally is in his future.

“Whether Nate gets drafted or signs a free agent contract, I would guess he will get a shot,” Huber said. “The tools the scouts look for are all there and I think some team will take a chance on him.”