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COUNTY NEWS REVIEW

SPOTLIGHTS

NORTH BRANCH | RUSH CITY

Vikings baseball looks to bounce back this spring

TRENTON REYNOLDS
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Coach: Matt Solberg
Last season: 3-17 overall, 8th in Mississippi 8, lost to Chisago Lakes in Section 7AAA tournament
Key returnees: Senior captain Bo Pederson, senior Ethan Thorsen, junior captain Jackson Puelston
Outlook: The North Branch baseball team looks to take a step forward this spring after enduring a tough season a year ago. The Vikings, a fairly younger unit this year than in the past, will aim to fill the spots of several vacated roles left behind by its senior class. Head coach Matt Solberg will rely on several key returnees this season who will strive to make the most of its opportunities playing in the ever-challenging Mississippi 8 Conference.

The Vikings expect big things from two-time team captain and senior Bo Pederson, along with fellow senior Ethan Thorsen. Those two will serve as leaders for the rest of the Vikings' youth on the roster this spring. Jackson Puelston, a three-year varsity athlete, "is pretty well acquainted with the upper-level," Solberg said.

Pederson will take charge on the mound for a majority of the innings this year, while also helming the center field and shortstop positions. Puelston is dealing with a minor arm injury, but Solberg expects him to be fully



PHOTO BY JORGE PERALES

The 2026 North Branch varsity baseball team.

healthy and ready to go sooner rather than later. "He will be in the top part of our lineup and he plays center field," Solberg said. "He might play a little bit of first base if his arm is bothering him, but he's a good leader and a great kid. He should be a nuisance on the bases for our opponents." Ben Herges, a junior catcher who's had a solid off-season according to Solberg, is another Vikings to keep an eye out for this season.

"He also pitches, too. He broke his toe last year in the second week of the season, so he had a much shorter [year]," he said. "He plays a lot of ball in the off-season with lots of other club organizations, so he is really primed to take off this year and make his mark."

Sophomore shortstop Clayton Nephew, junior Spencer Miller and sophomore Henry Christenson round out the list of impact players that Solberg has on his radar this year.

After a 2025 campaign where North Branch finished second to last in the conference and lost first round in the section tournament to its rival, Solberg and his team hope to be more competitive this year while striving to achieve a top-half finish in both the M8 and 7AAA play.

"Because we are so young and we have to fill a lot of holes, we want to finish in the top half of the conference," he said.

"If we can stack wins against the teams we can beat and then try to hang on and steal a few from the top teams like Princeton, Monticello and Becker, that'd be ideal. We have a lot of Division 1 talent from a pitching sense in our conference, so, if we could sneak out a few wins against teams like that and then take care of business versus the teams around our level, that will certainly help the record out. When it comes to section play, we want to be in the top half and host our first game," Solberg stated.

NB softball to have lots of upperclassmen leaders this spring

TRENTON REYNOLDS
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Coach: Kathy Crudo
Last season: 7-15 overall, 7th in Mississippi 8, lost to Hermantown in Section 7AAA tournament.

Key returnees: Seniors Kaytlin Hammond, Abby Pfeifer, Morgan Mann, Ellcey Johnson, Jocelyn Meyer, Kara Sullivan and Madison Orf.

Outlook: After a down season last spring, the North Branch softball team looks to reload and get back to the Class AAA state softball tournament. With seven seniors on the roster this year, the

squad returns several veteran athletes in key areas who will aim to contribute at the highest level for head coach Kathy Crudo's team.

"I think that all of our returning upperclassmen will be huge contributors for us down the stretch this season," Crudo said. "They all just bring something different to the table, and they are all very talented and athletic veterans to our varsity squad this spring."

Crudo's expectations for her unit this season consists of nothing short of just improving on a daily basis and competing game in and game out.

"We just want to get better every day and be better than we were the day before," she stated. "If we can compete hard and show that toughness against most teams this



PHOTO BY JORGE PERALES

The 2026 North Branch varsity softball team.

season, then I feel like we can compete with anybody."

With having such a top-heavy senior class, Crudo believes that some of the distractions that come with being a senior could create a challenge throughout the course of the spring campaign.

"I think that since we are so senior heavy, it creates the balance of them staying locked in for their senior year, but also still experiencing their senior year and

everything that goes with it. Like graduation, graduation parties, prom, that sort of thing," Crudo said.

"So, it's about making sure that they stay focused on this one last ride and giving the program their own legacy. I also think we are young in the pitching department, but I am confident to see how that all unfolds for us. All in all, we're really excited for the year ahead," Crudo added.

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NB boys golf eyes continued success under new leader, section

TRENTON REYNOLDS

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Coach: Jonny Bodell, 1st season**Last season:** 1st in Mississippi 8, 2nd in Section 7A to Totino-Grace**Key returnees:** Sophomore captain Nicholas Melvin, junior captain Aiden Peterson, Drake Dimich, Carter Magnuson, Ian Smith**Outlook:** The North Branch boys golf team comes off a 2025 spring season where the program saw its first conference title in roughly twenty years. The boys team will also join the girls side of the program this year in moving up a class in its section from 7A to 7AA. First year head coach Jonny Bodell, an assistant coach on the Vikings' staff the past couple of years alongside former head coach Ryan Minke who golfed for Chisago Lakes during his high school tenure, believes the move will ultimately help his

PHOTO BY JORGE PERALES

The 2026 North Branch boys varsity golf team.

group make it to state as a team.

“It could actually help give us a really good chance to make it to state as a team, just solely off the fact that we don’t have to face Totino-Grace anymore,” Bodell said, of the section realignment. “They were beating everybody by rough

thirty-to-fourty [strokes].”

The five seniors on the roster this year, including several Vikings key returnees who come back into the mix, will help make that goal attainable. Bodell’s core five from last season’s conference winning team all return to the roster this spring

in Nick Melvin, Aiden Peterson, Drake Dimich, Carter Magnuson and Ian Smith.

From an expectations standpoint, Bodell hopes his boys can repeat as conference champions this year, which would help pave the way for the Vikings to eventually reach its all end goal of capturing a Class AA state berth as a team.

“With being able to retain all of our golfers from last year and winning the conference, I think that everybody’s goal is to obviously repeat as the conference champs. I know the main, grand goal would be for us to punch our ticket as a team to state,” he said.

“That’d be our big, big goal. I know that’s the goal for all of our golfers, too. That’s what they want to do. It may take a little bit of work, and maybe even a little bit of luck. But, I think it’s the most doable that’s been in a long, long time,” Bodell stated.

Vikings girls golf prepares to compete in new section

TRENTON REYNOLDS

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Coach: Chad Carlson, 3rd season**Last season:** 3rd in Mississippi 8, 3rd in Section 7A**Key returnees:** Annabelle Lattimore, Jenna Minke, Lauren Thiel, Gabby Desrosier, Vada Bassett and Sawyer Peterson**Outlook:** The North Branch girls golf team will swing for big things this spring, as a large chunk of its talent from the year prior returns to the lineup for head coach Chad Carlson’s squad. A three-year varsity returner and an All-Conference honorable mention last season in captain Annabelle Lattimore enters the mix yet again this season with the hope and expectation of helping lead her team to greater heights.

Captain Jenna Minke, a two-year varsity returner and an All-Conference recipient last year, will also look to make a big impact on the course this spring.

“She’s continued to improve her game in all facets every year,” Carlson said. “I expect that to continue this season.”

Lauren Thiel, Gabby Desrosier, Vada Bassett and Sawyer Peterson will look to follow suit and come up as big time contributors behind its pair of captains down the stretch of the 2026 campaign.

That said, with five returning letter winners, Carlson hopes to use that experience to continue to get better.

“We need to use that experience to continue to improve and get better each and every single day, just like we have done over the last few years or so,” he said.

The Vikings are moving up a section class from Section 7A to Section 7AA, where Carlson notes “that gaining comfort with our new opponents will be key,” he said.

Carlson hopes his team can live up to the expectations of competing in the conference and section.

“It is also a challenge to live up to those expectations

that we set as a team and as individuals, but the lessons learned over the past couple of years should help overcome those challenges,” he stated.

“We are continuing to grow as a program and have seventeen girls out for this season. We want to build a passion for golf in our newer players. With that, it is always our goal to compete at our highest level and improve on our scoring averages, both individually and as a team.”



PHOTO BY JORGE PERALES

The 2026 North Branch girls varsity golf team.

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NB boys track hopes to overcome inexperience

TRENTON REYNOLDS
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Coach: Brent Lundgren
Last season: 8th in Mississippi 8, 9th in Section 7AA.
Key returnees: Seniors Joseph and Nate Damiani, sophomore Nolan Weidenhamer.

Outlook: The North Branch boys track and field team is a bit more inexperienced than in year's past, but there's still plenty of talent to go around on behalf of head coach Brent Lundgren's crew.

The brotherly duo of Joseph and Nate Damiani will be a pair of key pieces this spring, where Lundgren says, "They will both be big time key contributors for us this year to our distance crew.

"Their senior leadership and



PHOTO BY JORGE PERALES

The 2026 North Branch varsity boys track and field team.

experience are going to be something that the distance boys will lean on this season. Nolan Weidenhamer is going to be a great young sprinter and jumper for us as well. He has already cleared 5'10" in the high

jump with ample room to grow," he said.

That said, Lundgren hopes his boys can compete well enough to earn top-three finishes in both the Mississippi 8 Conference and in Section 7AA action.

"Beyond team accolades, our primary focus is on developing each athlete and providing as many as possible with big-meet experience. Success will also be measured by personal growth, as we aim for every athlete to achieve their own goals and personal bests throughout the season," he said.

In terms of challenges, Lundgren notes the youth of his roster. "This season, one of the major challenges we will face is having a very inexperienced team. We have very few upperclassmen, but their leadership will be vital in mentoring the underclassmen both on the track and in embracing our track family culture. Additionally, as always, staying healthy will be crucial to our success. "Happy and healthy" is a phrase we use often," Lundgren said.

North Branch girls track has returning talent to work with

TRENTON REYNOLDS
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Coach: Norman Nagel, 16th season
Last season: 6th in Mississippi 8, 2nd in Section 7AA meet

Key returnees: Kailie Kopp, Ella Dick, Brooke Giese, Evelina Gilkerson, Ava Witkowski

Outlook: The North Branch girls track and field team will look to have a repeat season this spring where a multitude of athletes and relay groups clinched Class AA state berths last year. After losing four seniors to graduation over the offseason where they combined to have upwards of 22 total years of varsity experience, the Vikings reloaded with more seniors and returning athletes who look to do some damage for head coach Norm Nagel's crew.

That includes Kailie Kopp (jumps and relays), Ella Dick (pole vault and relays), Brooke Giese (pole vault), Evelina Gilkerson (mid-long distance) and Ava Witkowski (mid-long distance). Valerie Zarbok (hurdles) and Heidi Hedberg (throws) are also two Vikings to watch out for this spring.

Regarding expectations for the year ahead, Nagel points out the goal of creating a positive team culture and environment, as well as sending as many girls back to the Class AA state meet.

"We'd like to create a positive team culture, have fun and have the kids want to come back the next day, and hopefully get some of our athletes some All-Conference recognition," he said.

"All-Conference academic awards and all state academic recognitions are important to us, and overall, we'd like to win the True Team meet and hopefully come out

on top in our section in order to send some of our Viking athletes to the state level this season. We're all excited for what's in store."

Nagel believes that good health is important for his team down the stretch, where he also hopes for weather cooperation this spring.

"We just need to stay healthy and keep climbing that mountain," he said. "The weather will be a factor also, as it could affect our races in the early part of the season here. If we can't get outside, our field events may suffer a little until it starts to warm up.

"I'm really excited to start putting the puzzle together for this year's team. We will be very strong in the field events and sprints, and our distance crew is deeper than last year's. We just have a real great mixture of upper and lower classmen, and I think they are all headed in the right direction," Nagel said.

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PHOTO BY JORGE PERALES

The 2026 North Branch girls varsity track and field team.

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Rush City softball poised for another deep section run

TRENTON REYNOLDS
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Coach: Kayla Jeska, 2nd season.

Last season: 19-7 overall, 1st in Great River Conference, lost to Esko in Section 7AA championship.

Key returnees: Senior Kendal Pillar, junior Natalie Rood, junior Cailyn Glenna, junior Addisyn Antonson and sophomore Lola Mold.

Outlook: The Rush City softball team came within a single win away from earning a trip to the Class AA state softball tournament last year after just falling short in the 7AA title game to Esko.

Following the departure of just one senior over the offseason — and with two valuable

seniors on the roster this time around in senior pitcher and 2025 Great River Conference MVP Kendal Pillar along with Bryleigh Blatz — the Tigers have a solid shot at returning to the section title game this spring given the fact that a large portion of last season's talent returns to head coach Kayla Jeska's squad.

But the Tigers hope to do more than just get back to the championship game — Rush City hopes to compete and put up a strong fight — one that would allow the program to reach the state tournament.

“My expectations for the girls is to compete for that section title after coming so close last year,” Jeska said. “We have been working on staying focused on the things that we are able to

control in our game.

“One of our main goals this season is taking the game one pitch at a time, one out at a time and one inning at a time. This keeps us focused on the present in order to stay positive, because you never know what may happen with the next pitch.”

Key returnees such as Pillar, juniors Natalie Rood, Cailyn Glenna and Addisyn Antonson, and sophomore Lola Mold, will help contribute to make those goals a reality this season.

“All these ladies bring a variety of experience and ambition to a team that is willing to put in the hard work to overcome any challenge that may arise. On the pitching mound, we have Kendal Pillar and Natalie

Rood mostly occupying that key spot, as well as the occasional appearance from Lola Mold,” Jeska said.

Pillar, Rood, Glenna and Mold all came away with All-Conference honors for their efforts shown last spring, while Antonson earned an Honorable Mention nod.

Pillar, Rood and Glenna also added to their 2025 accolades with All-Section awards following the end of the season last year.

The cluster of Tigers hope to add more hardware to their resumes again this spring while helping lead Rush City to greater heights this spring.

Behind those key returnees this year are a trio of newcomers in juniors Sydney Magnuson and Julianne

Halls, including sophomore Heather Quigley. Blatz, alongside junior Megan Nelson and a pair of freshmen in Ashlyn and Kensey Simmons, are four more returning varsity players from a year ago that Jeska said, “all bring so much dedication and grit.”

“Once again, we have a team of so many versatile players that we are able to utilize in many different positions,” Jeska said.

In terms of challenges, “We have good teams in our conference and section this year, so we will be looking to focus on our game and take it one pitch at a time. We are also going to continue to utilize the versatility of our team when we get into different situations,” Jeska said.

Tigers track and field hopes to grow as a unit this spring

TRENTON REYNOLDS
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Coach: Michael Vaughan

Key returnees: Girls' Kendra and Alayna Heintz, Megan Widell, Leah Stavig, Clara Niessen, boys Elijah and Joe Bergfalk, James Monson and Alex Flaten.

Outlook: The Rush City boys and girls track and field teams have a strong mix of upper and lower classmen throughout its rosters this year that could ultimately help aid the groups reel in plenty of success this spring.

With a large portion of last year's team returning on both the boys and girls sides, the Tigers hope to build off a season where they sent a lone athlete on behalf of the girls in sophomore Kendra Heintz to the state meet last year in the triple jump, where she placed third

overall and earned her first career state medal and hardware. She also took part in the long jump event at state.

Head coach Michael Vaughan, the veteran leader of the program, believes his key returnees and 13 total seniors this spring will help mold his team into its best form come the month of May.

Girls' seniors Megan Widell and Leah Stavig have “multiple years of varsity experience,” Vaughan said. “They're both looking really strong so far. They are both coming off of strong cross country seasons.”

Senior hurdler Alayna Heintz, who came out for cross country for the first time this past fall, “has built her confidence a lot with that,” Vaughan said, who also added that A. Heintz will compete in the 300m hurdles.

Sophomore Kendra Heintz, the sister to Alayna, is another key returner

to watch out for this spring after the underclassmen competed in two state events last spring as just a freshman. Clara Niessen, a jumper, rounds out the list of impact athletes to keep an eye on on the girls side.

On the boys side, seniors Elijah Bergfalk and James Monson will lead the distance crew this spring.

“Both of them have put on a ton of summer miles and have been working really hard with that. They're running with lots of confidence, and it's been great to see,” Vaughan said.

Alex Flaten, a first time cross country runner last fall, will also be helping out on the distance side of things for the Tiger boys this season. George Die-drich, an athlete who “just tries everything,” will be Vaughan's “swiss-army-knife.”

“He does relays, field events, sprints,

just about anything,” Vaughan said. “This year, he's going to try out the hurdles. I think he's going to have a good amount of success there.”

A sophomore thrower in Joe Bergfalk will lead the way on the throwing side of things. “He's doing very well, and he will be leading the way in the shot put and in the discus as well,” Vaughan said.

In terms of the expectations he has for both his boys and girls units, Vaughan just wants his team to be healthy.

“If we can stay healthy and avoid these injuries, I think we are going to have a really strong showing come True Team and conference time,” he said. “We are just looking to get a lot of these kids experience and grow together.”



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RC boys golf enters second year under new leader

TRENTON REYNOLDS
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Coach: Thomas Martin, 2nd season
Key returnees: Juniors Eli Umbreit and Aiden Rustad, sophomores Nate Umbreit and Hunter Zaske
Outlook: The Rush City varsity golf program will look a lot different this year than in years past. With unfortunately lower numbers on the girls side coming into the spring campaign, the Tigers will not field a girls varsity team this season. However, seven Tigers boys will be vying for the final six spots in second-year head coach Thomas Martin's lineup ahead of the team's first meet on Tuesday, April 14 at Grand National Golf Club in Hinckley.

Despite the unideal circumstances, Martin is excited to get to work with his crew this spring and is quite satisfied with the way things have begun to shake up in the early stages of the season.

"The boys are showing up and working very hard," he said. "They're putting forth the time and effort that's needed from them in order to be successful this season. We have some better quality depth this year than we have had before, so we are quite optimistic in the fact that we can not only have some good individual scores, but also put together some good team scores to become more competitive in our conference this year."

Rush City baseball to rely on its upperclassmen this season

TRENTON REYNOLDS
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Coach: Matthew Morgan
Last season: 13-6 overall, 2nd in Great River Conference, lost to Pequot Lakes in Section 7AA tournament.

Key returnees: Seniors Tyler Monson, Kyle Haugrud and Sam Behrendt.

Outlook: The Rush City baseball team lost four seniors to graduation over the offseason, where those four leaders combined for over 16 years of varsity experience. However, the Tigers reloaded with three more seniors on the roster this year who will aim to help build off of a strong season for Rush City last spring.

Seniors Tyler Monson, Kyle Haugrud and Sam Behrendt will be key pieces to the puzzle for head coach Matthew Morgan this season. "All three have

grown athletically and have continued to develop into the main leaders of our squad. Overall, we will be extremely young, with potentially four freshmen starting on varsity for us this year," Morgan said.

Juniors Braylon Nihart, Landen Parkin and Sam Dick round out the list of key returnees on behalf of the Tigers this spring. "With our young group, our juniors and seniors are going to be counted on for their experience, leadership and guidance."

Morgan, with his team being one of the youngest he's had over his coaching career, just wants his team to compete and improve every game.

"Although we are very young, we have a good group of guys that are willing to work hard and show up each day with a great attitude. We've been a very consistent and fundamental baseball

program the past several years and have done a nice job of limiting mistakes," Morgan said.

"With our young group, I think consistency, along with developing strong fundamentals and limiting our mistakes will be our main blueprint. We will also need to re-build our pitching staff, as our top four pitchers are now gone. But, we have some young guys that are very talented. In the past few years, we've had a few guys that you knew were going to produce at a high level. I think this year, it will take our entire lineup to fill into their roles and find a way to produce when counted on.

"I'm just extremely excited to get going, because we are young, but the kids are fun to be around and thus far have come a long way since day one," Morgan stated.



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Spring burning restrictions begin

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources is restricting the open burning of vegetative debris effective as of March 30 for Chisago and Isanti counties as well as 29 other counties around the state.

The restrictions are due to increased wildfire risk resulting from warm temperatures and dry conditions in parts of central, northwest, and northeast Minnesota.

Besides Chisago and Isanti, the restrictions apply in the following counties: Aitkin, Anoka, Beltrami South, Benton, Cass, Clay, Crow Wing, Douglas, Grant, Hennepin, Hubbard, Itasca, Kanabec, Mille Lacs, Morrison, Norman, Otter Tail, Pine, Pope, Ramsey, Sherburne, Stearns, Stevens, Todd, Traverse, Wadena, Washington, Wilkin, and Wright.

The DNR will not issue

permits for open burning of brush or yard waste in these counties until restrictions are lifted.

"Wildfire risk increases each year after the snow melts and before vegetation greens up," said Karen Harrison, DNR wildfire prevention specialist. "Spring burning restrictions help reduce the number of wildfires, especially those caused by debris burning."

Harrison encourages people to use other methods to handle yard waste, such as composting, chipping or taking brush to a collection site.

For more information, visit the composting for woodland owners page of the DNR website (<https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/wildfire/prevention/debris-composting.html>).

permits for open burning of brush or yard waste in these counties until restrictions are lifted.

People cause more than 90% of wildfires in Minnesota. If a fire rekindles or escapes, the person who set it is liable for any damage caused, as well as for the costs of wildfire suppression.

Burning restrictions will be adjusted as conditions change.

For more information and daily updates on current fire risk and open burning restrictions, visit the statewide wildfire danger and burning restrictions page of the DNR website (https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/forestry/fire/firerating_restrictions.html).

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