

# Softball Overcomes Early Jitters To Win Season Opener

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ROSEMOUNT, Minn. - The sixth-ranked UW-Eau Claire softball team showed a little rust to start off the season, but quickly turned around to notch wins of 5-4 and 6-4 over St. Mary's University (MN) this afternoon.

The matchup in the Rosemount Dome was the first of the season for the teams, both of which had fantastic seasons in 2007. St. Mary's went 24-15 last year and made it the conference title game before falling to St. Thomas (MN). The Blugolds took their conference tourney and rode the momentum into the NCAA Division III Championship. They took third in the nation, the highest finish ever in Blugold history.

The march back to nationals began today with a rough first inning in Game One. After this year's No. 1 pitcher, **Bri Sturm** (*Jr.-Zumbrota, MN/Zumbrota-Mazeppa*), got the first two batters out, Jenna Johnson reached on an error by the centerfielder. A single and a three-run homer followed to put the Cardinals up 3-0.

A two-out single to center in the second added a run to St. Mary's total and brought in **risti Doucette** (*Jr.-Green Bay/Ashwaubenon*) from the bullpen.

The Eau Claire bats got the run back in the bottom the inning when **Tamara Zeman** (*So.-Lodi*) doubled in pinch-runner **Meghan O'Hearn** (*Fr.-Woodbury, MN*) with none out. O'Hearn pinch-ran for **Bekki Kidnie** (*So.-St. Paul, MN/Johnson*), who doubled in front of Zeman.

Though the Eau Claire offense could not score Zeman in the second, it jumped on Cardinal pitching for three runs and four hits in the third. Leadoff hitter **Casey Leisgang** (*Sr.-Seymour*) singled to start the frame and **Betsy Kettinger** (*Jr.-Bloomington, MN/Jefferson*) moved her to second on a sac bunt. **Jill Janke** (*Sr.-Black River Falls*) then gave Eau Claire its first homer of the year with a two-run shot to left.

Cleanup hitter **Michelle Butkus** (*Sr.-Medford*) followed the blast with a single. Kidnie then hit into a fielder's choice, but an error by the shortstop allowed Butkus to advance safely to third. Zeman knocked Butkus in with a subsequent single, which would be the last run of the inning.

The game wouldn't be tied at 4-4 for long though. In the bottom of the fourth, Leisgang singled with one out and stole second. With two down, Janke doubled to the gap in left-center to plate Leisgang and break the tie.

Doucette and **Jenny Ross** (*Fr.-Mendota Heights, MN/Henry Sibley*) allowed just two baserunners in the final three innings to give Eau Claire the one-run game. Doucette got the win with three and a third innings in relief. She allowed just two hits and no walks while striking out two. Ross picked up the save with the final two innings.

Janke had a 2-for-4 day with three RBIs and the round-tripper. Leisgang and Zeman both hit 3 for 3 while Leisgang crossed the plate twice and Zeman knocked in two runners. The offense compiled 10 hits to the Cards' nine.

The second game was a repeat of the first, as Eau Claire came from behind after starting pitching gave up some early runs.

**Brooke Malnory** (*Fr.-Chippewa Falls/Chi-Hi*) started the second game but ran into the early-inning problems. She allowed two hits in the bottom of the first with one being a two-run jack by Johnson.

Eau Claire cut the lead in half during the top of the second when Zeman scored on a two-out wild pitch. She drew a leadoff walk and the Blugolds used some small-ball to move her to third before St. Mary's starter Sara Fitzgerald hurled one off-target.

The bottom of the second started with a Hannah Schmitt single for the Cardinals. Malnory uncorked her second wild pitch of the day to advance Schmitt to second and Jennifer Thesing doubled her in to chase Malnory from the game.

Sturm relieved the freshman and got two quick outs, but an RBI single with two down gave the Cards a 4-1 lead.

Kettinger, batting second, moved Eau Claire one run closer in the next half-inning when she smacked a one-out home run to left.

The Blugold offense loaded the bases with one out in the fourth and with two out in the fifth, but could not come up with the big hit as they went into the sixth down by a pair.

The sixth was a different story, as Eau Claire scored four runs off six hits in the frame. Doucette led off the inning with a single and **Jen Peterson** (*So.-Arden Hills, MN/Mounds View*) doubled in Doucette's pinch-runner, **Emily Pierce** (*Fr.-Holmen*). Leisgang tied it up with a double of her own in the next at-bat and she scored on a Kettinger single. With still nobody out, a base hit followed to put two on.

Butkus singled to center and it appeared the bases would be full, but an error by the centerfielder allowed Kettinger to round third and keep on going. Three straight K's ended the scoring fest, but it was too late with Eau Claire up 6-4.

Ross pitched the last two innings to get her second save of the day. Last year's team-leader in saves had three all season and the Blugolds had six total among all pitchers for the year. Sturm got the victory with four innings of work from the pen. She allowed three hits and the run in the second was credited to Malnory.

Kettinger was the offensive hero in Game Two, going 3 for 4 with two runs and two RBIs. Her sixth-inning single plated the go-ahead run as well. Eau Claire outhit the Cardinals 13-to-8 in the second game.

One of the question marks going into the season was the outfield, which Coach Leslie Huntington lost last year. Veteran **Tessa Pecha** (*Sr.-Eau Claire*) was in left today for the first game while Zeman was in center and **Sara Baumgartner** (*Fr.-Arcadia*) was in right. Doucette saw time in left during the second contest while Zeman stayed in center and Peterson played right. The Blugolds continue their play in Rosemount with games against Gustavus Adolphus College (MN) tomorrow and 10th-ranked St. Thomas on Sunday. Tomorrow's doubleheader starts at 6 p.m. while Sunday's is at 10 a.m. Eau Claire-St. Mary's Game One Box Score Eau Claire-St. Mary's Game Two Box Score- PH -