

BY SARAH JOHNSON



LA CROSSE LOGGERS



LA CROSSE LOGGERS



SARAH JOHNSON

## The Northwoods League

THEY'RE THE SOUNDS THAT WARM every baseball fan's heart after a long winter—the pop of the ball hitting the catcher's mitt and the crack of the bat when a player makes solid contact. And in a setting so intimate that this slice of Americana is not drowned out by corporate excess. At Northwoods League games around the Midwest, ball fans can experience grassroots baseball and watch future major leaguers in ballparks steeped in the game's history.

Founded in 1994, the Northwoods League is a short-season (72 games) collegiate league with 20 teams scattered throughout Minnesota, North Dakota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Michigan, Illinois and Ontario, Canada. It attracts prospects from around the country trying to catch the eye of scouts. Unlike most college games where the “ping” of the aluminum bat is repeatedly heard, this league uses the wooden variety to more closely resemble the professional experience.

### HISTORY PLAYS OUT

Players stay with host families throughout the summer and are not paid, so they can maintain their amateur status and NCAA eligibility. Major leaguers who have participated in the league include the Washington Nationals' Max Scherzer and

the Chicago Cubs' Ben Zobrist. Similar to the minor leagues, teams often sport colorful nicknames—who can resist a team called the Dock Spiders?

Last year on a gorgeous July evening, I sat in the stands at Copeland Park in La Crosse, Wis., on the shore of the Mississippi River, and watched an extra-inning affair with an ending so bizarre I'm still not sure what happened. At Duluth, Minn.'s, Wade Stadium, built in 1941 as a WPA project with more than 300,000 bricks from the city's renovated Grand Avenue, the top row boasts a panoramic view of Lake Superior. And Carson Park in Eau Claire, Wis., was once home to Baseball Hall of Famers Hank Aaron and Joe Torre.

This summer holds the promise of the future. It's going to be a beautiful day for baseball.

### PLANNING YOUR TRIP

For more information, call (507) 536-4679 or visit [northwoodsleague.com](http://northwoodsleague.com). For travel-planning assistance, contact your local AAA Travel agent or [AAA.com/travel](http://AAA.com/travel).

*Sarah Johnson is a Twin Cities-based freelance writer. AAA*