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POWER

Perfect fit: Madonna right choice for Monroe pitcher

BY PERRY A. FARRELL • FREE PRESS SPORTS WRITER • JUNE 15, 2008

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Division I schools in the state have to be scratching their heads at how Al White continues to trump them.

ADVERTISEMENT Freshman pitcher Jessica Irwin may illustrate what White and Madonna University have going for them.

"I had a couple of offers from a couple of big schools and a couple of offers from small schools," Irwin said of being recruited out of Monroe High. "Honestly, I love Coach Al and his coaching staff. They are amazing. Coach is very tough on the field.

"I decided I'd rather go to a smaller school than a bigger school. It came down to Madonna and Western (Michigan), and I was really close to going to Western. I love Madonna. The team is great. I knew when I worked out with them the first time that this was where I wanted to go. They all made me feel welcomed."



Jess Irwin has been a star at Madonna University this season.

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White wasn't so confident in his ability to land what he considered a prize student athlete in Irwin, who made an immediate impact in leading the Wolverine Hoosier Athletic Conference in victories and winning the conference's pitcher of the year award.

"We had a few of the big boys looking at her," White said. "Central Michigan really jumped in there. It started out with us and Wayne State. Wayne State kind of dropped out, and she decided she was coming to Madonna, then all of a sudden here's Central Michigan. I said 'God almighty, what's going on here?' The AD at Monroe was a graduate of Central Michigan. I think that's how they got involved. We were worried about that, because Central has one of the better programs in the state as far as Division 1.

"We kind of got over that and here comes Western looking at her, and I said there's no way we're going to get this girl."

But White and Madonna had a secret weapon that hooked Irwin right away.

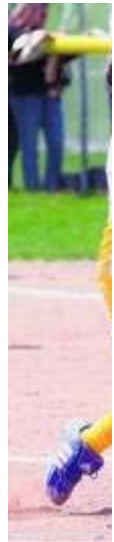
"The best thing we had, I thought, was we sold the family atmosphere to her and her parents," White said. "We just hit it off with her parents right off the bat, which helped,

and we stress classes first, family comes second, softball and work. As long as you can keep those four in order ... We really don't have any problems with our girls."

For Irwin, who turned 18 in November, adjusting to college hitters proved to be a relatively smooth transition.

Irwin won 24 games for the Crusaders to lead the conference. She also led the WHAC in earned-run average (1.03), complete games (26), shutouts (12), innings pitched (197.2) and strikeouts (275). She earned All-WHAC first team and National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics Region VIII first-team honors.

She pitched two no-hitters -- she says she can hardly remember either of them --



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March 29 against Midway and April 16 against Siena Heights. Her victory over Midway included 17 strikeouts.

She was named WHAC pitcher of the week four times and rewrote the school record books with her ERA, saves (3), strikeouts per nine innings (9.74), opponent batting average (.162) and shutouts.

Irwin's great season hasn't gone unnoticed by her former teammates at Monroe. Shortstop Katie Cooley and second baseman Amanda Straub have committed to Madonna next season from a team that finished 37-14-1.

"She comes in here and she wasn't even quite 18 when we started in September," White said. "She's pitching against women and fifth-year seniors who are almost 23 years old. It's a big difference in maturity and strength being in some of these programs. In the back of your mind you ask yourself is she going to be able to pitch at this level. We found out in a hurry that she could."

Contact **PERRY A. FARRELL** at 313-222-2555 or pafarrell@freepress.com

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