

Lions take control of MVC race

Written by Tom Fruehling

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Linn-Mar took sole possession of first place in the MVC Mississippi Division with a doubleheader sweep of Cedar Falls at home Wednesday night.

The Lions won the opener 5-2 after going ahead early but had to rally from a 6-0 deficit in the nightcap for a 9-8 comeback win.

The twin wins give them a 17-3 conference mark (22-8 overall) with a crucial double bill at Iowa City High Friday. The Little Hawks split a doubleheader at Kennedy Wednesday, leaving both teams at 16-4 in the tight division race.

It took some clutch hits and even more gutsy relief pitching for Linn-Mar to salvage the second game against Cedar Falls (15-14, 7-13 MVC).

The Tigers scored a run in the first on a passed ball, then jumped all over Lion starter Austin Stroschein for five runs in the second. They only collected four singles while batting through the order, but two Linn-Mar errors helped open the floodgates.

Jake Stolley put the Lions on the scoreboard with a double in the second.

And it was Stolley, normally a starting pitcher who is scheduled to throw Friday, who came on in relief for the seventh inning and struck out the side for his first save of the year.

"I just went in there with a lot of confidence," said the hard-throwing lefthander about preserving the one-run lead. "I was hoping for ground balls, but it felt great to get the strikeouts."

Seldom-used hurler Tyler Kane was given an even tougher task in the sixth inning when he was called in from the bullpen with one out and the bases loaded. He replaced Nick Jennings, who had come on for Stroschein to start the sixth after Linn-Mar had battled back to take a 9-7

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lead.

Jennings gave up a run on two hits and two walks, however, and made an early exit. Kane, who had one start and seven total innings on his resume this season, was brought in and mowed down both batters he faced. He immediately let out a scream of relief.

I'm a pretty emotional guy," said the lineman on the Linn-Mar football team. "I usually save it for the football field. But tonight the adrenaline was really going I just went in there to throw strikes."

Kane wasn't the only unheralded Lion to come through in the clutch.

Trailing 7-4 going into its half of the fifth, Linn-Mar erupted for five runs. And no blow was bigger than the triple smacked to deep left center by pinch hitter Travis Kvach to score Jimmy Roth with the final run.

"I'd been struggling at the plate," said Kvach, who started at second base earlier in the season.

With two outs and two strikes in the hole, the diminutive speedster tagged a fast ball and never slowed until sliding head first into third. Since Cedar Falls came back with a score in the sixth, the RBI by Kvach turned out to be the deciding score.

"Hopefully, that will get me some more at bats," he said afterward.

While the second game was a nail-biter for the Lions, they coasted in the first behind a solid complete game pitching performance from Keaton Blackford. His teammates spotted him a 3-0 lead in the third inning on RBI doubles by Roth and Nate Greve, along with a run-scoring single from Mitch Stickney.

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The Tigers loaded the bases in the fourth, but Blackford got a strikeout to end the inning.

After scoring their first run in the top of the sixth, the Tigers again filled the bases. But Blackford came through again with a strikeout to quell the rally.

"It was good to get two grinding wins," Lion Assistant Coach Kyle Rodenkirk said afterward. "Our sticks came alive early in the first one. And then in the second one we got down but just kept crawling our way back. The guys never gave up."

Assistant Brent Henry said pitching was the key in both victories.

"Blackford had a good game, and that was huge for us," he said. "Then the bullpen did a phenomenal job in that second game.

"Kane and Stolley had gut checks, and both of them came through."

GAME ONE

CEDAR FALLS (2)

Deines 3 0 0 0, Sole 3 0 1 0, Hagarty 4 0 1 0, Farley 4 0 2 1, Fletcher 3 0 1 0, Paup 3 0 0 0, Daniels 2 0 1 0, Mozena 3 0 0 0, Creger 2 1 1 0, Kuntz 0 0 0 0. Totals 27 2 7 1.

LINN-MAR (5)

Greve 3 1 1 1, Bogert 3 1 0 0, Redmond 4 0 1 0, Stickney 4 1 2 1, Stroschein 3 0 2 0, Roth 1 0 1 1, Stolley 1 0 0 1, Banks 3 0 0 0, Blackford 3 0 1 0, Kvach 0 2 0 0. Totals 25 5 8 4.

Cedar Falls 000 001 1 - 2 7 2

Linn-Mar 003 011 x - 5 8 1

W - Blackford. L - Kloos. 2B - Greve, Roth.

GAME TWO

CEDAR FALLS (8)

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Deines 3 3 1 1, Sole 3 0 2 1, Hagarty 4 1 2 1, Farley 3 0 2 2, Fletcher 4 0 2 2, Paup 3 1 0 0, Daniels 3 0 1 0, Kuntz 3 1 0 0, Creger 2 1 0 0, Mozena 0 1 0 0. Totals 28 8 10 7.

LINN-MAR (9)

Greve 4 1 0 0, Bogert 2 2 0 0, Redmond 4 1 2 0, Stickney 2 2 0 0, Stroschein 2 0 1 2, Roth 3 2 2 2, Stolley 3 0 1 1, Banks 2 0 0 1, Strellner 3 0 0 0, Mortensen 0 1 0 0. Totals 26 9 7 7.

Cedar Falls 150 101 0 - 8 10 2

Linn-Mar 022 050 x - 9 7 2

Seehase, Hagedorn (4), Sole (5). Stroschein, Jennings (6), Kane (6), Stolley (7). W - Stroschein. L - Hagedorn. S - Stolley. 2B - Hagarty, Stroschein, Roth, Stolley. 3B - Kvach. SB - Hagarty, Farley, Redmond.