

Kennedy and Solon in baseball dream game

Written by Jim Ecker

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Cedar Rapids Kennedy won the Class 4A state baseball title last summer, but some people wondered if Solon (the 2A champs) actually had the best team in Iowa.

It's too late for a conclusive answer, but it's not too late for a dream matchup between the two state champions.

Kennedy will play Solon in a special game on Saturday night, July 9 at Kennedy. Both teams undoubtedly will be ranked No.1 in their classes heading into the 2011 campaign, although Solon has now grown into a Class 3A club.

Kennedy Coach Bret Hoyer and Solon Coach Keith McSweeney both love the idea of challenging their players and treating fans to a special game.

"We thought there would be a lot of interest in that game," said Hoyer. "I would like to think it would draw a pretty good crowd. I know Solon will bring a lot of people."

Hoyer and McSweeney looked into the possibility of staging the contest at Veterans Memorial Stadium, the minor league ballpark in Cedar Rapids, but they were unable to find a suitable date.

Incredibly, Solon will return its entire team that finished 41-2 and beat Carroll Kuemper in the 2A championship game last season. The Spartans did not have any seniors in 2010 and can start the exact same lineup this season.

Kennedy lost several key players to graduation, but the Cougars return the top six batters in their lineup from their 11-1 victory over Iowa City West in the 4A finals with Terrell Sykes, Austin Christensen, Griffin Michael, Devon Jacobus, David Yancey and Cody Bell.

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Solon features a powerful lineup that includes Marshall Koehn, Nick Day, Derrick Loveless, Tyler Smith, Shawn Olson and Brandon Shulista, among others.

It will be champ versus champ.

"I think it's going to be a great day for baseball," said McSweeney. "It's going to be a great challenge for Solon and a lot of fun."

Both teams are stocked with college-bound athletes.

Christensen, the winning pitcher for Kennedy in the state finals, has signed with Nebraska. Sykes, Michael and Yancey have all signed with Southeastern Community College.

Loveless and Day have signed with the Iowa Hawkeyes, while Shulista and Olson have signed with Iowa Central. Koehn will be a kicker with the Iowa football team next season, and Smith plans to play football at Iowa Western Community College.

"Our kids will be excited to play them," said Hoyer.

The dream matchup would be even better if both clubs put their top pitchers on the mound, which could happen. Christensen went 9-4 for Kennedy last season and won four postseason games, while Shulista was a perfect 12-0 and tossed a complete game in the state finals.

Both coaches embrace the idea of challenging their players with a competitive schedule.

"Solon is extremely talented. And I've always felt it was important to create a challenging schedule for our guys," said Hoyer. "I want to play good people and help my guys get better."

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Solon plans to play other non-conference games against Davenport Assumption, Dubuque Wahlert and Mount Pleasant to complement its move to Class 3A baseball. McSweeney wants to test his players and get them ready for the postseason.

"It's why you want to play these games," he said.