

Kuch pitches Prairie past Linn-Mar

Written by Tom Fruehling

Tuesday, 25 June 2013 23:09 - Last Updated Tuesday, 25 June 2013 23:34



As the saying goes, it's always best to dance with the girl that brung ya.

After dropping three of four games in the very tough Clear Creek Amana softball tournament over the weekend, interim Prairie coach Lynette Stecklein put pitching ace Katie Kuch on the mound for both games Tuesday night at home against Linn-Mar.

The seasoned senior came through with two wins, 9-2 and 7-0.

"It's the first time this year we've started her in both games," said Stecklein. "But she had a good thing going in the first game and her pitch count was low.

"Katie was doing a great job moving the ball around, hitting her spots and getting ground balls. So we decided to go with her again, and it paid off."

Kuch (13-4) threw six innings in the opener, holding the Lions to one hit until they parlayed four singles in the fifth inning into two runs.

In the nightcap, the hard-throwing righthander with pinpoint accuracy allowed but three hits over five scoreless innings.

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"I felt good the whole way," she said. "My arm is pretty well conditioned by now, and I tried to be efficient.

"I don't throw a lot of strikeouts, but we pride ourselves on having great defense. I know for a fact that the defense is going to give me a lot of support. They did it again tonight."



Kuch also benefited from the Hawks' usual array of hot bats. With a team average of .318 coming into the doubleheader, Prairie (19-11, 14-6 MVC) doesn't have a weak hitter in the lineup.

Led by Gabi Carter with a .409 average, six starters are batting over .300. Stecklein's daughter Amanda was at .299 but boosted her average by going 4-for-4 with a double in the first game.

"I'd been pulling the ball too much," said the junior infielder. "So, I just tried to relax and put the ball in play. I think all my hits went up the middle."

She wasn't the only one with a big night.

Prairie batted around in the third inning of the opener, plating five runs on four hits. Junior Natalie Rumer had a bases-loaded double to bring home three of those runs.

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Rumer and freshman Olivia Usher were each 2-for-4 in the first game.

Usher was 2-for-3 in the second game with a triple. Senior Alyson O'Brian and sophomore Mallory Jones were both 2-for-2.

Linn-Mar Coach Mike Shipley said the Hawks' hits came at the right time, too.

"They got a lot of timely hits," said the first-year mentor. "In the first game, they capitalized on a lot of walks and in the second game they took advantage of our errors.

"They do all the little things well and put pressure on the other teams. They outplayed us tonight."

The Lions (10-18, 6-11 MVC) were on a four-game winning streak and had won five of their last six.

"I'm a little disappointed we came out kind of flat," Shipley said. "But we've got a lot of good young'uns playing, and it's a learning curve for them."

Sophomore pitcher Maddy Ryan hurled six strong innings for Linn-Mar but was done in by inopportune Prairie hits.

"We'd get two outs, and it seemed like every time they'd get a run in," she said. "And we left too many runners on base."

Prairie assistant coach Stecklein, who will coach another doubleheader Thursday at Waterloo

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West while head coach Joe Yegge sits out a suspension, said the twin wins over Linn-Mar were especially satisfying.

“We’ve been talking all year about playing a full 14 innings,” she said. “I thought we did that tonight.

“Great pitching by Katie was key, but we had solid defense behind her. And we got timely hits. That was huge.”