

No.2 Ankeny too strong for Prairie

Written by Jim Ecker

Tuesday, 23 July 2013 20:19 - Last Updated Tuesday, 23 July 2013 21:04



FORT DODGE - Cedar Rapids Prairie pitcher Katie Kuch had a few big, moist tears in her eyes after the Hawks lost to Ankeny, 8-1, in the opening round of the state softball tournament Tuesday, but she knew the Hawks had just faced a formidable opponent.

Ankeny is the defending state champion, loaded with Division I talent and the No.1 seed in the tournament. Prairie, by contrast, had never been to the state tournament before and is the only unranked team in the Class 5A field.

The odds were extremely steep.

"I didn't hit my spots, but they're a great team," said Kuch, wiping away a tear. "I take my hat off to them. I wanted to keep them off-balance a little more than I did.

"They're a great team," she said a second time. "They have a really good chance of winning state."

Ankeny (33-10) will face Dowling Catholic (32-11) in the 5A semifinals Thursday night at Harlan Rogers Park in Fort Dodge.

Prairie (28-15) returns to Harlan Rogers on Wednesday to face Dubuque Senior (33-8) in a consolation game at noon. The Hawks will play again Wednesday at 4 p.m., either in a consolation game for fifth place or seventh place.

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Prairie played a near-flawless contest when it upset No.4 Pleasant Valley, 3-2, last week in the regional finals to reach the state tournament for the first time in school history. The Hawks needed another top-notch effort against Ankeny, but it did not turn out that way against a traditional state power.

Prairie made two fielding errors, committed a base-running blunder and gave Ankeny too many good pitches to hit.



"It happens," said catcher Aly O'Brian, who had two of Prairie's six hits. "Everybody makes a mistake once in awhile. It's how you can bounce back from it. We couldn't put it back together."

Prairie center fielder Brittney Lash temporarily kept Ankeny off the scoreboard in the first inning when she snared a fly ball and gunned down a runner at the plate for a double play, but the Hawkettes ended up scoring twice in the inning anyway on a bloop single with two outs for a 2-0 edge.

Ankeny made it 4-0 in the second inning when freshman catcher Kendyl Lindaman, the top slugger in the state, belted a two-run homer to center field on a mistake from Kuch. Ankeny had a runner at second base with two outs, so Kuch was supposed to pitch around Lindaman and not worry about a walk.

Unfortunately for Prairie, the first pitch to Lindaman was right down the middle of the plate. She clobbered it for her 24th home run of the season.

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"It wasn't supposed to be anywhere near the plate," said Coach Joe Yegge. "That ball was fat."

Ankeny scored four more runs in the fifth inning to bust it open, 8-0, and chase Kuch (21-8) from the game.

Prairie scored its only run in the top of the seventh inning. O'Brian singled to left and was replaced by Taylor Moenk as a courtesy runner for the catcher. Moenk advanced to second base and third base on wild pitches and scored on a two-out single by Mallory Jones.

The Hawks were naturally disappointed with the loss, but not devastated. Few people expected the Hawks to get to the state tournament this season after winning only eight games in 2012, and then they drew the defending state champions in the first round.

Everybody plays three games in the state tournament and the Hawks still hope to make their mark in Fort Dodge.

"We have a chance to go out and finish fifth. We got to state. We hit the ball well," said Yegge, in his first year as Prairie's head coach. "I was a little disappointed that we were still nervous in the fifth inning. That's the one thing I was disappointed in.

"Now granted, it's their first state tournament," he said. "I was expecting, maybe, the deer in the headlights look. I kind of thought we'd get through that."

Kuch allowed eight runs (seven earned) and 11 hits in 4 2/3 innings.

"Katie wasn't on her game," said Yegge. "Coming into the game, the girls were still mesmerized by the size of the crowd. If we came back next year, it would be a totally different story. We'll learn from it."

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Jones finished with two hits for Prairie.

Natalie Halvorson, just a graduated eighth grader, relieved Kuch with two outs in the fifth inning and immediately got Lindaman to hit a ground ball that was misplayed for an infield error. Halvorson then retired the side on a fly ball and pitched a 1-2-3 sixth inning.

"She came in and got a ground ball against the best hitter in the state," said Yegge. "Shut them down. That excites me."

Prairie had only three seniors in the starting lineup Tuesday with Lash in center field, Kuch in the circle and O'Brian behind the plate. The rest of the team is young.

"We've got promise," said Yegge. "Hopefully the girls will realize that."

PRAIRIE (1): Jones, ss, 4 0 2 1, Lash, cf, 3 0 1 0, Carter, 3b, 3 0 0 0, Rumer, dp, 3 0 0 0, Pipolo, pr, 0 0 0 0, Usher, rf, 3 0 1 0, Thumann, pr, 0 0 0 0, Gudenkauf, 1b, 3 0 0 0, O'Brian, c, 3 0 2 0, Moenk, cr, 0 1 0 0, Stecklein, 2b, 3 0 0 0, Lueck, lf, 2 0 0 0, Kuch, p, 0 0 0 0, Halvorson, p, 0 0 0 0. Totals 27 1 6 1.

ANKENY (8): Lindaman, c, 3 1 2 2, Brooks, cr, 0 0 0 0, Bingham, cf, 4 1 1 0, Dorpinghaus, 2b, 4 1 1 0, Chambers, ss, 4 1 2 0, Parker, rf, 3 0 2 2, Steinfeldt, 3b, 3 1 0 0, Moss, dp, 2 2 2 0, Baumhover, lf, 1 1 0 0, Ballard, 1b, 3 0 1 1, Clayberg, p, 0 0 0 0. Totals 27 8 11 5.

Prairie 000 000 1 - 1 6 2
Ankeny 220 040 x - 8 11 1

Kuch, Halvorson (5) and O'Brian. Clayberg and Lindaman. W - Clayberg. L - Kuch. HR - Lindaman. SB - Moss 2.