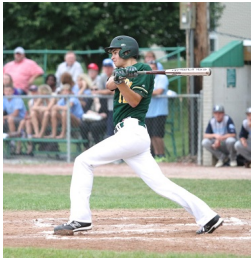


Lizarraga shines as Cougars dump J-Hawks

Written by Jim Ecker

Monday, 07 July 2014 21:28 - Last Updated Monday, 07 July 2014 21:41



Sammy Lizarraga could have a big decision to make when it comes time for him to play college baseball in two years.

He's been an outstanding catcher since he was a little kid, but now he's developed into one of the top pitchers in the state as well.

Lizarraga tossed a two-hitter Monday and collected five RBIs as No. 3 Kennedy thumped Jefferson, 11-1, in five innings at Bill Herkelman Field.

A scout from Northern Illinois University clocked Lizarraga's fastball at 87 mph early in the game, a significant jump from his best heater last year as a sophomore. He struck out three straight batters in the fifth inning to end the game.

Lizarraga, a lanky 6-foot-4 right-hander, isn't sure what he'll do in college.

"It depends on where I go and what they want me to play and what level I'm playing at," he said. "I love to catch, but it feels pretty good pitching, too."

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"I love both," he said. "It's going to be a hard decision when the time comes. My heart has always been with catching, because my brother did it and it's what I've done."

Lizarraga's older brother, Jimmy, was an all-state catcher at Kennedy and is a catcher at Mount Mercy University.

Lizarraga plans to keep playing both spots for the Cougars, even though being a pitcher and catcher can be hard on the body.

"I'm feeling a lot better than I was expecting," he said. "I was expecting to be a little more sore and to struggle a little bit more, but I'm feeling OK. I go to the trainer a lot and do what I have to do to be able to play."

Kennedy Coach Bret Hoyer has been careful with Lizarraga. He'll let Lizarraga pitch the first game of a doubleheader and catch the second, but will not let him pitch one day and catch the next day.

Lizarraga might play somewhere in the field Tuesday when Kennedy visits Jefferson for the rematch at 5 p.m., but Hoyer will not put him behind the plate. He could be the designated hitter after going 2-for-3 with a pair of two-run singles and five RBIs Monday.

Lizarraga got off to a slow start as a hitter this year, but he's raised his average to .295 with two homers and a team-high 30 RBIs in 28 games.

"In the beginning I was a little anxious," he said. "I learned a little patience and worked with Coach and really worked on what I need to do. I'm seeing the ball well now. I'd like to keep it going."

Lizarraga has a 6-0 record and 1.19 ERA, with 39 strikeouts in 47 innings for one of the top pitching staffs in the state.

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"He's picked up some velocity," said Hoyer. "He's picked up about 6 or 7 mph over the off-season and that's helped him a ton. And then tonight he had a good feel for his change-up, and that made it really tough on people."

Lizarraga is happy with his increased speed on the mound. "I feel like I'm getting up there, which is good," he said. "About time."

Lizarraga finished with six strikeouts. Jefferson scored an unearned run in the fourth inning, but otherwise the J-Hawks had trouble making solid contact.

"Lizarraga was throwing awesome," said Jefferson Coach Kyle Rodenkirk. "He was dialed in pretty good. And their hitters, tip your cap to them."

Zach Daniels went 3-for-3 for Kennedy with two RBIs, raising his batting average to .465 with 28 RBIs. Daniels (6-0, 0.32 ERA) probably will be Kennedy's starting pitcher against Jefferson Tuesday.

The J-Hawks had good luck against Lizarraga in the championship game of the Metro tournament in May, raking him for seven runs (six earned) and eight hits in five innings. Kennedy rallied to win that game, 20-10, and he got a no-decision that night.

"It was playing on me a little bit," he said. "They're the only ones who have hit me hard this year. It was always in the back of my mind, but I was just hitting the mitt, throwing strikes and good things happen."

Kennedy raised its records to 25-3 overall and 19-2 in the Mississippi Valley Conference. Jefferson fell to 18-12 overall and 12-9 in the MVC with its sixth straight defeat.

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Jefferson sophomore Jared Eivins, one of the team's top pitchers and hitters, is currently on the disabled list with a dislocated shoulder, but Rodenkirk thinks Eivins might be able to play again this season.

Jefferson sophomore Spencer VanScoyoc has been taking a break from pitching due to arm "fatigue," according to Rodenkirk, but VanScoyoc played center field Monday and is expected to start pitching again soon.

"We're banged up a little bit, but like I keep telling the guys, you just have to steady the course and good things are going to happen," said Rodenkirk. "We're just reeling right now. The confidence is a little bit down, but we'll show up tomorrow."

Jefferson 000 10 - 1 2 1
Kennedy 204 5x - 11 10 1

W - Lizarraga. L - Hunt.