

Metro softball hits 16-year drought

Written by Jim Ecker

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This was a good year for girls softball in the Metro area.

Xavier and Jefferson won division titles in the Mississippi Valley Conference.

Six of the seven Metro teams (all but Marion) had winning records.

Kennedy, Linn-Mar and Washington all showed significant improvement from 2013, turning losing records into winning marks under new head coaches.

Kennedy jumped from 13-25 to 27-14. Linn-Mar improved from 16-22 to 27-14. Washington went from 14-25 to 22-16.

Clearly, all three of those teams are headed in the right direction.

Prairie had another solid year with 25 wins, although the Hawks dipped by four victories from a year ago.

Across the board, Metro softball teams appear to be in good hands and in good shape. And Maybe - just maybe - they'll win a state title one of these years.

Teams from the vaunted CIML - the Central Iowa Metropolitan League - have captured 12

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straight softball titles in the large-school category. It happened again Friday night when Johnston topped Southeast Polk in Fort Dodge in the 5A finals.

North Scott is the last non-CIML team to capture a large-school title. That was in 2002, when most of today's players were just little kids.

Jefferson is the last - and only - Metro team to win a state softball crown. The J-Hawks prevailed in 1983, 1997 and 1998 under Hall of Fame coach Larry Niemeyer, but their last title was 16 years ago and Niemeyer is not coaching anymore.

Nobody else from the Metro area has ever won a state title, and you have to wonder why.

West Des Moines Valley has claimed five titles in the past 12 years. Dowling, Des Moines East and Johnston have two crowns. Ankeny has one.

Is it population? Talent? Coaching? Tradition? Emphasis?

Seventeen of the 40 teams in Class 5A were from the CIML this year. That's nearly half the teams, but that does not fully explain 12 straight titles.

Are their club teams better than our club teams? Do they have better feeder systems? Do they have more money over there? Does all that local competition in the CIML force everyone to get better?

Jefferson placed second in 2004 and 2005. Linn-Mar was second in 2006, so there have been some near-misses for the Metro.

But none of the Metro teams reached the big-school tournament in 2011 and 2012. Jefferson

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placed fifth and Prairie was sixth in 2013, but Jefferson was the only school to reach the tournament this year and finished seventh.

Metro teams had lots of talented young players on their rosters this year. Presumably, they'll continue to get better. Let's hope so.

It takes the right combination of pitching, hitting and defense to win a state title, and you can spell PITCHING in capital letters. There are some good pitchers in the Metro and they need to keep improving.

It might help if some of the Metro teams would stiffen their schedules during the regular season and play more CIML opponents, but scheduling is a tricky deal and it takes two to tango.

Jefferson had five CIML teams on its schedule for the regular season, which is a healthy amount, but three of those games got rained out. Linn-Mar played four CIML clubs during the regular season, also a good amount.

Kennedy faced one CIML squad during the regular season. Prairie and Washington did not play any. Perhaps that needs to change.

The CIML teams face all of their top pitchers on a regular basis when they play each other, so it's nothing new when they enter the regional tournament. They've seen it all before.

All four teams that reached the semifinals of the Class 5A tournament this year were from the CIML. The same was true last year.

Metro teams should not be satisfied with good regular-season records and a good showing in the Mississippi Valley Conference. There's more out there.

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There's a state title to be won.