

Daniels enjoys special year with Cougars

Written by Jim Ecker

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Kennedy junior Zach Daniels has been playing baseball for as long as he can remember. Fielding grounders, swinging a bat, throwing a ball.

He was just a toddler when it all began.

"My dad started doing stuff with me when I was 2 years old," he said Monday night after practice. "Like in the back yard, he'd hit me some balls and I'd hit off the tee.

"I started at a really young age," he said with a grin.

It's paid off for Daniels, who has enjoyed a special year with the third-ranked Cougars on their path to the Class 4A state tournament.

Kennedy (31-6) faces Southeast Polk (29-13) in the opening round Wednesday at approximately 8 p.m. at Principal Park in Des Moines.

Daniels has excelled as pitcher, hitter, second baseman and base-runner. He has an 8-1 record and 1.02 ERA, a .471 batting average with 32 RBIs, sure hands in the infield and 22 stolen

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bases in 23 tries.

"He's had a real solid year," said Kennedy Coach Bret Hoyer, who does not like to trumpet players before their season and career are over. "I think he'd be the first to tell you he wouldn't be 8-and-1 without some defense behind him and the guys scoring some runs for him.

"He also hits between two pretty good hitters (Derek Jacobus and Sammy Lizarraga), so that helps, too. Derek is going to distract pitchers from what they want to do when he's on base, so that's going to lead to some fat pitches for Zach to hit."

Daniels has been named the Athlete of the Year in the Valley Division of the Mississippi Valley Conference and he's been named first team all-district. He'll undoubtedly make the all-state teams when they are selected as well.

"I'm honored and appreciate the recognition," he said. "I've just been throwing strikes. Every other pitcher is doing the same thing (Kennedy has a staff ERA of 1.71).

"But hitting-wise, I definitely did not want to start out the year like I did last year. I've been seeing the ball well and making contact."

Daniels dug a big hole for himself at the start of the 2013 campaign. He thinks he was hitless in his first 30 at-bats, but finally got untracked and finished the year with a respectable .302 average for a sophomore.

"We've been doing this for a long time, and we can tell if a kid is going to hit," said Hoyer, who stuck with Daniels. "He was taking good swings. Things just weren't falling for him."

Daniels was 5-2 with a 2.22 ERA last season to go along with that .302 batting average. Now he's 8-1 with a 1.02 ERA and the .471 batting average in one of the best single seasons in school history.

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"I don't know if we saw those specific numbers coming, but we knew he was capable of having a pretty nice year," said Hoyer.

Daniels got accustomed to fielding hard grounder when his father, Mark, would hit rockets at him in practice. Daniels would calmly get in front of the ball and make the plays, even when he was 7 or 8 years old.

He's still making the plays for Kennedy. "My teammates make fun of me," he said, "because I make it look easy all the time."

Daniels stands 5-foot-11, but weighs only 145 pounds. He's carried a hefty role for the Cougars on their ride to the state tournament.

"If we keep playing the way we've been playing, we'll be fine," he said.

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