

## Kennedy seeks back-to-back state titles

Written by Jim Ecker

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*(EDITOR'S NOTE: Second in a series of preseason Metro baseball stories. Next: Linn-Mar.)*

The Cedar Rapids Kennedy baseball team will have a fat bull's-eye on its back as the 2011 campaign begins next week.

As it turns out, that's perfectly all right with Coach Bret Hoyer.

"I love it," he said. "I'd take it every single year, because it usually means you won the state title. I'd love to have it every single year."

Indeed, the Cougars won the Class 4A state title last summer with a 32-10 record and appear to have another strong club this year. The players who hit No.1 through No.6 in the championship game lineup against Iowa City West are all back, led by all-state right fielder and pitcher Austin Christensen.

There were some key departures from 2010 with Ryan Dusil, Sam Hunter, B.J. Cunningham, Brendan Drahm and Connor Bartosh all lost to graduation, but Kennedy appears to have the depth and talent to make another run at the top.

As usual, Hoyer plans to use a variety of combinations during the early part of the season in pursuit of his best lineup.

"We're consistently inconsistent in May and June," he said, "but we're pretty consistent after the 4th of July because we're willing to take our lumps and move people around to different spots and let the chips fall where they may. That's always our goal, to be playing our best baseball when July rolls around."

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Kennedy has made eight trips to the state tournament since 2000, compiling a sparkling 25-3 record in substate tournaments during that 11-year span, and the Cougars won their first state title last season with a dominant performance in Des Moines.

Kennedy defeated West Des Moines Dowling (12-2), Mason City (10-2) and Iowa City West (11-1) in the tournament, belting clubs that were ranked No.1, No.2 and No.3 in various polls by a combined margin of 33-5.



Hoyer had finished in second place at state tournaments on three occasions -- once at Iowa City Regina, twice at Kennedy -- and was thrilled to take the final step.

"It's such a gratifying feeling," he said. "You've probably heard some of the comments people would make, 'Hoyer can't win the big one.' That sort of thing plays its way around to me.

"It was really gratifying on that bus ride home (from Des Moines), getting all those text messages from former players. The in-box was full before I could get to my cell phone and get it turned on. There must have been 75 messages."

Now comes the next question: Is there more pressure to win the state title again this year with a strong nucleus, or is there less pressure because they've already done it?

"It's a good question," Hoyer remarked. "I suppose there's always that fear of being a little complacent, because we've finally accomplished something. We feel like we've been pretty close to winning a state title on several occasions in the last 10 years."

However, he does not think complacency will be a problem. "I've been very pleased with the

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work they've put in during the off-season," he said.

Hoyer, 45, has compiled a 473-249 record in 18 years at Kennedy and a 537-287 mark in 21 years overall (including a 64-38 mark in three years at Regina).

Christensen had a banner year for the Cougars last season. He hit .492 with eight home runs and 44 RBIs to lead Kennedy in all major offensive categories, and he went 9-4 with a 1.94 ERA with 86 strikeouts in 75 2/3 innings on the mound. He was the winning pitcher in the state championship game and went 4-0 in the postseason.

Christensen has been making all-state teams since he was a freshman and has signed to play college baseball at Nebraska.

The Cougars have three other college-bound players on the team in shortstop/pitcher Griffin Michael, second baseman Terrell Sykes and left fielder/pitcher David Yancey. All three have signed with Southeastern Community College in West Burlington.

Michael hit .374 last season and went 2-2, 3.00 ERA on the mound. Sykes hit .398 and helped ignite the offense when he became the leadoff hitter at mid-season. Yancey finished at .315 with three homers and 24 RBIs and compiled a 3-1 record on the mound.

All four of those players -- Christensen, Michael, Sykes and Yancey -- are excellent defensive players. Michael and Sykes give Kennedy a slick double-play combination. Michael has been battling a problem with the hamate bone on his left hand, but he could still pitch and play shortstop if he isn't able to swing the bat.

"The good news is, we know we can have him play defense," Hoyer said. "As long as we have him for defense at shortstop and on the mound, I still like our chances, with how deep we are and how strong we are."

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"It would be a plus to have his bat in the lineup, and hopefully that will be the case. We just have to let nature take its course on his hand."

Devon Jacobus hit .364 with 36 RBIs at third base last season as a sophomore and Cody Bell swung a big bat for the Cougars in the state tournament following a late promotion from the sophomore team.

The biggest question mark for Kennedy is behind the plate. Hunter hit only .189 as a senior and normally yielded to a designated hitter, but he was worth his weight in gold as a defensive player and unsung hero.

Matt Maiers, a reserve on last year's team, and Jimmy Lizarraga, the starting catcher on Kennedy's successful sophomore team, could share the job until one of them emerges as the starter. Hoyer said he'll be comfortable with either guy behind the plate.

Hoyer said he has several candidates in center field and first base, with good competition at both spots. Logan Ambrosy hit .276 in center field last year as a sophomore with 26 starts.

Adam Lloyd (2-1, 0.67) saw spot duty on the mound as a sophomore and could be in the rotation this season. Colin Taylor (1-0, 1.91) did good work as a relief pitcher and part-time DH (.368).

Alex Hayden, the starting shortstop on the sophomore team, has been competing for playing time and could be a valuable utility player for the Cougars. Nick Appleget, one of the top pitchers on the sophomore team, had arthroscopic knee surgery in April but is hopeful of making a major contribution this year.

Josh Jahlas is competing for playing time in the outfield after a good year with the sophs, and senior Austin Benson can play several positions for Kennedy. Alex Larson, a reserve on last year's team, has transferred to Jefferson.

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Hoyer said the sophomore team compiled a 31-2 record last season. Mitch Wagner, the second baseman on that club, transferred to Marion High School. Dakota Miller, a third baseman/pitcher on the sophomore team last year, elected not to play for Kennedy this season.

The Cougars play Jefferson in the opening round of the Metro Tournament on Monday, May 23 at 7 p.m. at Kennedy.