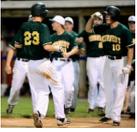


No. 1 Cougars nip J-Hawks for Metro title

Written by Jim Ecker

Thursday, 28 May 2015 05:32 - Last Updated Friday, 29 May 2015 05:24



If the Kennedy Cougars are truly the No. 1 baseball team in Class 4A this year, then the Jefferson J-Hawks must be No. 1A.

Round 1 went to the Cougars Wednesday night, by a whisker.

Sammy Lizarraga ripped a game-winning single with the bases loaded in the bottom of the ninth inning to give Kennedy a dramatic 5-4 victory over Jefferson in the championship game of the Bob Vrbicek Metro Tournament.

Lizarraga said he's never had a bigger hit in his career, not even when the Junior Cougars won the USSSA World Series a few years ago.

"That was a big one," he said after his walk-off screamer to right-center. "Senior year, Metro tournament. That was a lot of fun."

Kennedy and Jefferson are now tied for the most titles in Metro Tournament history with 13 apiece.

The J-Hawks scored four runs against Kennedy ace Zach Daniels in the early going and it was tied, 4-4, after three innings. But it stayed that way for a long, long time.

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Jacob Henry relieved Daniels in the fourth inning and tossed five shutout innings, wriggling out of several jams thanks to clutch pitches and excellent defense.

At one point, Jefferson superstar Spencer VanScoyoc led off the fifth inning with a towering triple to right-center but was stranded at third base by Henry.

"Humbling," said Jefferson Coach Kyle Rodenkirk of the missed opportunity.

Jefferson also got excellent relief pitching from Jared Eivins and Tyler Konigsmark, who combined for six straight scoreless innings, thanks in part to a sensational twisting catch by VanScoyoc in deep center field to rob Tyler Dralle of extra bases.

"That was a big-league catch," said Rodenkirk.



Kennedy turned double-plays in the seventh, eighth and ninth innings to keep Jefferson off the scoreboard. The J-Hawks had the bases loaded in the top of the seventh, but the Cougars turned a 5-2-3 twin-killing to escape damage.

Mitchell Gaffey was hit by a pitch to start the bottom of the ninth for Kennedy. He stole second and Daniels, an elite all-state selection last year, was given an intentional walk.

Dralle put down a bunt and Jefferson tried for the force at third, but Gaffey beat the rap on a bang-bang play to load the bases with nobody out. Lizarraga worked the count to 2-2 against

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Konigsmark, then fouled off a pitch to build the suspense.

Lizarraga ripped the next pitch to right-center and Gaffey trotted home with the winner to end the classic battle.

Dralle pitched the ninth inning and got the win, thanks in part to one of those double plays. Konigsmark, who pitched well, was the hard-luck loser.

Daniels did not have his best stuff on the mound, but Henry and Dralle rode to the rescue.

"A pretty gutty performance by those kids," said Kennedy Coach Bret Hoyer. "They continued to pound the zone, they didn't give anything away and our defense made plays behind them."

VanScoyoc, who has committed to Arizona State, nearly won the game for the J-Hawks. He went 2-for-3 with a towering double and a towering triple, then Kennedy gave him an intentional walk in the seventh inning with a runner at second base and first base open.

VanScoyoc's catch in center field was a thing of beauty, racing back to the track and somehow snatching the ball at the last second.

"He's a real player," said Lizarraga. "I know he's going to do great things in the future."

VanScoyoc, a junior, had little to say after the disappointing loss. "We just made some mental mistakes tonight and we'll get them fixed for the next time," he remarked.

The Cougars made some mental mistakes as well, but those three double plays in the seventh, eighth and ninth innings went a long way toward securing the victory.

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"That's what we do," said Lizarraga, who was 3-for-4 in the game. "We practice fundamentals and we execute them in the game. That's why we do it."

It looked like it might be Jefferson's night when they got to Daniels early, but the J-Hawks had to settle for second place.

"We'll be OK," Rodenkirk said. "We'll be fine. This is a pretty salty ballclub we've got. They'll be ready to play tomorrow."

Jefferson hosts Solon Thursday night.

"That was a good game," Rodenkirk continued. "We tip out caps to those guys. It was a fun game."

"I told the boys, you have to execute when you have that chance, especially against a good team like that. Otherwise that's what happens."

Lizarraga was impressed with Jefferson.

"I have an awful lot of respect for them," he said. "They've progressed more than any other team I've seen in the past few years. They can be really good and I'm expecting to see them in July at the end of the season."

Rodenkirk confirmed that VanScoyoc might miss some playing time with the J-Hawks while attending a Perfect Game showcase in Florida, but he does not expect his star player to be gone too long.

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Jefferson ☐ ☐ **022 000 000 - 4 8 1**

Kennedy ☐ ☐ ☐ **130 000 001 - 5 8 0**

W - Dralle. L - Konigsmark.