

Kennedy takes pair from Xavier

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Cedar Rapids Kennedy softball program has made great strides under Coach Dan Gratz the last two seasons and has now become a major factor in the Mississippi Valley Conference.

They showed why Thursday night.

The Cougars swept an MVC twinbill from Xavier, 3-2 and 1-0, with strong pitching, good defense and a few timely hits.

Kennedy struggled with records of 9-32, 13-27 and 13-25 in 2011, 2012 and 2013, but it's been a different story since Gratz arrived on the scene last year. The Cougars went 27-14 in 2014 and are 23-9 and counting this season.

Sophomore Jenna Schwartzhoff pitched a complete game in the 3-2 victory, then senior Andrea McEachran tossed a three-hit shutout with 11 strikeouts in the nightcap.

"We're just like a totally different team this year," said McEachran. "We have some of the same players, but we have new coaching. I think all of us really want it really bad this year and we just want to prove we can compete."

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The Cougars have a solid 16-6 record in the Valley Division of the Mississippi Valley Conference. That's good for third place in a division that features top-ranked Iowa City West and fifth-ranked Cedar Rapids Jefferson, but that 16-6 mark would be good for first place in the Mississippi Division if the Cougars had been placed in that bracket this year.

Gratz is not overly concerned with conference standings at this point, however. He was simply happy with the way his club performed against Xavier in two tight games.

"I thought it was two of the best 'team' games of the year, and that's what we've been preaching," he said. "We keep getting better, and that's what we've got to do right now. For us, it's just about getting better.

"These girls all want to play at the next level, so that's what we're doing. If we're sending them to the next level as great players, then we've done our job."

Gratz said he stressed the basics when he took over the program last year.



"Every place I've coached it's just been about fundamentals," he remarked. "You see what our defense looks like. Hitting is going to come and go, so we don't worry too much about that."

It's all about execution and fundamentals.

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"And we're getting great pitching right now, so that's keeping us in it. Those are the biggest things," he said.

The first game was tied, 2-2, in the fifth inning when Kennedy mounted a threat and put runners at first and third. Megan Weber collected an RBI single, driving in Paige Timmerman with the go-ahead run.

McEachran had a no-hitter for four innings of the second game. Xavier got singles in the fifth, sixth and seventh innings, but could not push a run across.

McEachran was hit on her pitching hand with two outs in the seventh inning when Steph Wehr lined a single up the middle, but she shook it off and got the final out with her 11th strikeout. The ball hit the middle finger on her right hand.

"A little puffy," McEachran said after the game.

McEachran called it her best game of the year. "Probably," she said. "Usually I give up more hits than that. And they're a really good team, obviously."

Maria Steffen pitched a strong game for Xavier in the nightcap but was the hard-luck loser. The Cougars scored their only run in the sixth inning when Ashley Winterowd scored on a bunt single by Sydney Kinney.

Xavier fell to 19-13 overall and 13-11 in the conference.