

No. 2 J-Hawks take stride toward title

Written by Jim Ecker

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This has turned into a special year for the Cedar Rapids Jefferson baseball team and the best could be yet to come.

The J-Hawks are ranked No. 2 in Class 4A, they're close to winning their first Mississippi Valley Conference title in 10 years, and they've got an excellent shot at making the state tournament for the first time in 17 years.

Jefferson took another big step Monday night by whipping No. 8 Kennedy, 4-0, on a four-hit shutout by Spencer VanScoyoc at the Jefferson field.

The J-Hawks and Cougars meet again at approximately 7 p.m. Tuesday at Kennedy

Jefferson has a two-game lead in the loss column in the Valley Division standings with only five games left in their MVC campaign. They are 25-6 overall, 17-4 in the conference and looking good.

VanScoyoc likes what's happening with the program under Coach Kyle Rodenkirk, a Jefferson alum who has injected new life into the J-Hawks the past few years.

"It's a whole different experience than it was a couple of years ago," said VanScoyoc, a junior who began playing for the varsity as an eighth grader. "The whole idea of Jefferson baseball has changed.

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"The fan base, the energy, the whole atmosphere is completely different. It's a lot more exciting."

The Kennedy Cougars have built their program on pitching and defense under Coach Bret Hoyer the past 23 years, but the Cougars are suddenly having serious trouble on defense. They committed seven errors in a 10-3 loss to No. 3 Johnston on Saturday and made five more errors in the 4-0 loss to No. 2 Jefferson.

Jacob Henry tossed a strong game for Kennedy and allowed only three hits, but things went haywire for the Cougars in the fourth inning when the J-Hawks scored all four of their runs.

Tyler Roeder began the inning with a double and the Cougars gave VanScoyoc an intentional walk. Lucas Larson was called upon to lay down a sacrifice bunt, but the bunt was so good that he beat it out for an infield single to load the bases with nobody out.

Kennedy brought the infield in and got what it wanted when Manny Olutunde hit a bouncer to Zach Daniels, but Kennedy's normally sure-handed shortstop committed an error and two runs scored. The Cougars made two more errors in the inning and Jefferson rode the 4-0 lead to victory with VanScoyoc in charge on the mound.

"Spence threw well tonight. All three pitches," said Rodenkirk. "He had his fastball, curveball and changeup.

"Usually when his changeup is on, I know it's going to be a good night. It's pretty filthy stuff."

Van Scoyoc, who has committed to Arizona State, needed only 88 pitches. "A pretty good

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outing," said his coach.



VanScoyoc, also an excellent hitter and center fielder, missed a few games last month while attending a Perfect Game showcase in Florida, but said he'll play with the J-Hawks for the rest of the season with no more interruptions.

Jefferson paid a special tribute Monday night to Joe Rodenkirk, the coach's father who has been battling leukemia since 2012. Joe Rodenkirk threw out the ceremonial first pitch and the school sold special T-shirts that said "Joe's Fight Is Our Fight," with proceeds going to help him fight the disease.

Kyle Rodenkirk, who caught the first pitch from his father, thanked his players for helping to make it a special night.

"I was telling them, 'You guys are my family, because I don't get to spend time with my family while coaching,'" he remarked. "I said, 'You guys are my boys. I love you all to death. I'll do anything for you.'

"That's really what coaching is all about, getting them ready for the real world and how they can respond."

Rodenkirk is not ready to celebrate his club's success this year with the conference title and possible trip to the state tournament still on the menu. He said their record is "pretty impressive" so far, but hesitated to go beyond that.

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"I look at it, like everybody does, at the end of the year," he said. "They've come a long way. They've put the time in, like everybody has, in the off-season. A pretty tight, cohesive group."

Daniels collected two of the four hits against VanScoyoc. Kennedy's record fell to 20-7 overall and 11-6 in the conference.

Kennedy □ 000 000 0 - 0 4 5

Jefferson □ 000 400 x - 4 3 0

W - S. VanScoyoc. L - Henry.