

Lions pound Falcons for trip to state

Written by Tom Fruehling

Tuesday, 14 July 2015 22:22 - Last Updated Wednesday, 15 July 2015 21:43



The magic is back.

Seven years since their last go-around in the state softball tournament, the Linn-Mar Lions will return to Fort Dodge next week after drubbing Davenport West, 12-2, in six innings Tuesday night in the Class 5A regional finals on the Kennedy diamond.

Seven of their runs were scored in a third-inning barrage that put the match out of reach.

The Lions were led by supremely confident freshman Ally Johnson with four hits and a gutsy pitching performance by senior Maddy Ryan.

And guiding the late-blooming, fresh-faced Linn-Mar squad (25-17) back to state is wily 67-year-old coach John Begley, a student supervisor and bus driver at the school for the past 21 years.

This is hardly Begley's first rodeo, though.

In his long coaching career at five schools, he's taken six other teams to the tournament and won it all with Solon in 2003.

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"It's nice," he said, "to finally do it with the school where I've been for the past 21 years."

They did it by pounding the ball all night against both pitchers thrown at them by a Davenport West team (18-20) that was in the final on the strength of a 4-0 upset of Kennedy last week. Not that the Falcons were expected to be doormats based on a 10-0 victory over Linn-Mar in early June.

They spotted the Lions a 3-0 lead Tuesday in the first two innings but looked like they were going to make a game of it in the top of the third. After Courtney Harris and Jayme Finn singled, Sydney Schneider knocked them home with a hard double to left center. Another single by Rachel Stewart put runners on the corners with one out.

But Linn-Mar's Ryan, who allowed just five hits all night, buckled down. She whiffed West clean-up hitter Lexy Monty on a called strikeout, then set down a swinging Chelsea Notton to snuff the rally.

"That was huge," Begley said. "That was really the only time they hit Maddy all night, but if they'd gotten another hit right then it would have been worrisome. But she stayed the course and struck out their big hitters.

"When Maddy is working the ball low she's a tough cookie. And tonight she was a tough cookie."

So was ninth grade infielder Johnson, who said she enjoyed her best hitting night of the season but didn't seem at all surprised by it.

"I go up there to hit," she said. "I look for my pitch. My favorite is high and outside, and they just

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kept

throwing it to me all night.”



As a foretaste of what was to come, she led off the bottom of the first with a sharp single to right that rolled between the fielder’s legs. She scored on Michaela Kennedy’s single, and Kennedy came home on a double to right by Ryan.

Johnson doubled in the second inning, bringing home courtesy runner Natalie Shepherd.

“If I get a hit right off, I usually get on a roll,” said Johnson. “Tonight I got on a roll.”

Noted Coach Begley, “They just couldn’t get her out. The young lady is just a terrific hitter.”

Johnson clubbed another double in the decisive third, when the young Lions parlayed seven hits into seven runs. Elison Ollinger and Elly Schuemann each had a pair of RBIs in the onslaught.

Linn-Mar tacked on another run in the fifth when Johnson led off with a single and came home on a grounder by Ryan. That made the score 11-2.

To prove that it was her night to shine, Johnson came up for the fifth time in the sixth inning with runners on second and third. Another hit would trigger the 10-run mercy rule. Instead, she was walked, leaving

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Kennedy to knock in the game-ending run.

“I really wanted to hit the ball,” Johnson said. “But the important thing is we won and get to go to state.

“Team first. That’s what it’s been all about for us all year.”

Linn-Mar will face third-ranked Jefferson (35-7) in the first round of the state tournament at 3:30 p.m. Monday in Fort Dodge.

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Linn-Mar □ □ □ □ □ 217 011 - 12 14 1

WP – Maddy Ryan. LP – Lexie Lizano.