

J-Hawks cherish win over Lions at state

Written by Jim Ecker

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FORT DODGE - Alyssa Olson has pitched better games during her all-state career with the Jefferson J-Hawks, but few have felt as sweet as this one did Monday afternoon.

Olson tossed a complete game as the third-ranked J-Hawks topped Linn-Mar, 6-3, in the opening round of the Class 5A state tournament at Harlan Rogers Park in Fort Dodge.

Olson and the J-Hawks lost in the opening round of the state tournament in 2013 and 2014, so this was the last chance for Olson and the rest of the Jefferson seniors to reach the semifinals.

"It feels great," she said. "We knew coming into this game that it wasn't going to be easy, by any means. We knew that Linn-Mar was going to put up a fight and we were going to put up a fight."

Olson has enjoyed lots of big wins, including a 7-0 masterpiece with 13 strikeouts against Muscatine in the regional finals two years ago as a sophomore. Monday's victory was really big, too.

"This is definitely up there, right behind the Muscatine game," she said. "That Muscatine game will be No. 1 in my heart forever."

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That could change if the J-Hawks (36-7) win two more games in Fort Dodge and captured the fourth state title in school history. Jefferson faces Johnston (34-4) in the semifinals Thursday at 5 p.m. The finals are Friday.

West Des Moines Valley (36-6) plays Waukee (34-8) in the other semifinal Thursday at 3 p.m.

The J-Hawks lost to Southeast Polk, 2-0, in the opening round last year and lost to Ottumwa, 2-0, in the opening round in 2013. Olson pitched both of those games and all of the seniors wanted another chance to make amends.

"We have talked about this since we left here last year," said Coach Brian Erbe. "We couldn't wait to have the opportunity to get back and couldn't wait to get after it and win a game up here and play on Thursday and have a chance.

"That's all you ask for, is to have a chance in life," he said. "The seniors have talked about it and talked about it and talked about it and they have so much invested."



Olson raised her record to 19-4 with the complete-game victory. She allowed only three hits, but walked two straight batters in the sixth inning with Jefferson sitting on a 5-1 lead. Both of the Linn-Mar batters who walked came around to score, making it a 5-3 game and renewing the suspense.

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Olson had a one-hitter through five innings, then struggled a little. "I don't know what happened toward the end," she said. "Going to sleep a little bit."

Jefferson collected an insurance run in the bottom of the sixth on an RBI single by Erin Kuba to make it 6-3. Linn-Mar got a runner on base with two outs in the seventh, but Olson ended the game with her fifth strikeout on a changeup.

Olson pumped her fist a few times after the final out and hugged second baseman Lindsey Culver in happiness and relief.

"We finally got past that first game," said Maddie Hansen, Jefferson's all-state catcher. "We wanted to change that (losing in the first round). I cannot wait to play that next game. It will be so much fun."

Jefferson was clinging to a 2-1 lead in the fifth inning when Kennedy Dighton belted a two-run double to right-center to make it 4-1. Sydney Briney ran for Dighton and scored on an error to make it 5-1.

Erbe told Dighton to get deep into the count against Linn-Mar pitcher Maddy Ryan and try to hit the ball to the right side. "I guess I listened to him," said Dighton with a big smile. "I hit it to the right side and it found the gap and we scored two, so that was nice."

Linn-Mar was charged with four errors in the game and only half of the runs against Ryan were earned.

"A good fight, just too many errors," said Linn-Mar Coach John Begley. "You can't make that many errors against Jefferson and expect to win. That's basically the game."

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Linn-Mar (25-18) will face Bettendorf (22-14) in the consolation round Wednesday at 10 a.m.

Linn-Mar □ □ **100 002 0 - 3 3 4**

Jefferson □ **020 031 x - 6 6 2**

W - Olson. L - Ryan.