

Cougars carry Herk's No. 29 to state

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Kennedy Cougars bid their final farewell to Bill Herkelman on Tuesday at the funeral service for their beloved assistant coach, but they'll carry Herk's jersey No. 29 with them onto the field at the Class 4A state baseball tournament Wednesday at Principal Park in Des Moines.

All of the Kennedy players have new practice T-shirts for the state tournament and all the shirts have Herkelman's No. 29 on the back in big numbers. So when the Cougars take the field for pre-game drills Wednesday, there will be several dozen No. 29's all over the place.

The Cougars will then wear their special T-shirts under their game jerseys for their Class 4A quarterfinal matchup against Davenport North at 5 p.m.

All of the Cougars, including head coach Bret Hoyer and his assistants, wore their new shirts to the funeral service for Herkelman on Tuesday at the Faith Lutheran Church in Marion. Herkelman, 77, died Friday after suffering a stroke last Thursday.

Herkelman's final day in uniform at the ballpark came last Wednesday at Herkelman Field at Kennedy High School when the sixth-ranked Cougars walloped Cedar Falls, 18-1, in four innings in the substate finals.

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Herkelman was buried in his Kennedy uniform Tuesday, his hands folded over a Kennedy baseball cap in repose. There was also a St. Louis Cardinals baseball cap in the coffin in honor of his favorite Major League team.

Herkelman spent 52 years as an educator, including 45 years at Kennedy from the day the high school opened in 1967 until the day he retired as a math teacher in 2012. He spent 36 of those years as a baseball coach at Kennedy, compiling a 318-224 record in 16 years as the head coach from 1977 through 1992.

Herkelman is a member of the Iowa High School Baseball Coaches Association Hall of Fame. The Kennedy field was named in his honor last year.

The theme of Tuesday's funeral service for Herkelman was "A Job Well Done" as a father, teacher, coach, friend, role model, church member and citizen. His son, Stan, spoke eloquently of his father during the 70-minute service, which drew an overflow gathering at Faith Lutheran Church.

Stan Herkelman talked about his father's contagious passion and enthusiasm for all aspects of life. "Well done, Dad. Well done," he remarked.

Stan Herkelman borrowed a famous line from Lou Gehrig, saying he and his brother Dan were "The luckiest people on the face of the earth to have had Dad as our father."

Faith Lutheran Church Pastor John Albertson originally used the phrase "Job Well Done" at Herk's bedside during Herk's final moments at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics last Friday. Herkelman was a charter member of the church for the past 36 years and served as an usher.

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"People like Bill are a real gift to us as we pass through life," the pastor remarked.

Pastor Albertson talked about Herkelman's integrity, fairness, simple pleasures, modesty and sportsmanship. He spoke about Herk's lasting impact on people, his passion for being a teacher and his love of Kennedy baseball.

The pastor said Herkelman loved the beauty of the game, whether it was a shortstop and second baseman turning a crisp double play or a pitcher covering first base on a grounder to the right side of the infield. He noted that Herk was a stickler for playing the game the way it was meant to be played.

"God gave you two hands: Use them!," the pastor remarked, quoting a favorite Herk-ism.

They played "Take Me Out To The Ballgame" outside the church when the service ended. It was raining and there was no game Tuesday, but a whole bunch of No. 29's will be playing for Herk on Wednesday at the state tournament in Des Moines.