

Lizarraga sparkles as Cougars win for Herk

Written by Jim Ecker

Wednesday, 29 July 2015 19:11 - Last Updated Friday, 31 July 2015 22:26



DES MOINES - A traumatic few days for the Cedar Rapids Kennedy baseball team ended with a magnificent performance by Sammy Lizarraga at the Class 4A state tournament Wednesday night.

Lizarraga sizzled on the mound with 14 strikeouts and the Cougars made a heart-felt tribute to Bill "Herk" Herkelman with a tense 3-2 victory over Davenport North at Principal Park in Des Moines.

Kennedy (30-11) will face Iowa City West (33-11) in the semifinals Friday night at 7:30.

The emotional week for the Cougars began last Wednesday night with an 18-1 victory over Cedar Falls in the substate finals. Two days later, they learned the horrible news that Herkelman - their beloved 77-year-old assistant coach - had died after suffering a stroke.

All the Cougars attended Herkelman's funeral service on Tuesday, then got on the bus Wednesday and traveled to Des Moines for the state tournament.

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"The last week has been like a roller-coaster," said Lizarraga. "It's been an emotional week for all of us. We're on a high right now and we plan on keeping it that way."

Lizarraga tossed a three-hitter with a blazing fastball and sharp breaking ball. He just missed matching the all-time record of 15 strikeouts in a state tournament game, shared by six pitchers.

"I thought I threw it pretty well," he said modestly. "I was hitting my spots. I definitely had my stuff today."

Lizarraga raised his record to 8-0 this season and lowered his ERA to a miniscule 0.70. Both of Davenport North's runs Wednesday were unearned as the Cougars committed four errors.

Lizarraga, a 6-foot-4 senior who is headed to Wabash Valley Community College, also picked a runner off second base to end the sixth inning with the Cougars clinging to a 3-2 lead. And it was his suicide squeeze bunt that drove in Mitchell Gaffey with the go-ahead run to snap a 2-2 tie in the fifth.



All of the Cougars wore new T-shirts for pre-game drills with Herkelman's No. 29 on their backs. And instead of coming out as individuals for the pre-game introductions, they all waited in the dugout and came out together in tribute to Herkelman, still wearing their No. 29 shirts before pulling on their game jerseys.

Kennedy Coach Bret Hoyer, known for effective use of the suicide squeeze, did not use the tactic a whole lot this year, but he pulled it out Wednesday. "It was one of Herk's favorite plays,"

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he said, smiling. "The situation called for it."

The Cougars also did not throw the ball around the infield following any of Lizarraga's 14 strikeouts or any of the other seven outs in the ballgame. "Another Herk," said Hoyer. "He doesn't like it when you throw the ball around."

Kennedy got off to a fast start in the top of the first inning with two runs on two infield singles, an error and a ringing RBI single by Jackson Behn, but their offense went into hibernation after that. "I think we got caught up that two runs would be enough," said Daniels. "That cost us later when we made some costly errors."

Davenport North made it 2-1 in the third inning when Daniels, an excellent shortstop, committed an error on a simple ground ball with the bases loaded and two outs.

The Wildcats tied the game, 2-2, in the fourth inning when the Cougars made three more errors, putting Lizarraga's masterpiece on the mound in jeopardy. Instead of getting rattled, Lizarraga got even tougher.

He ended the fourth inning with his ninth strikeout, struck out the side in the fifth inning, picked the potential tying run off second base in the sixth inning and had a 1-2-3 inning in the seventh.

"I'm just so proud of him," said Hoyer. "He had every reason to come unglued when his teammates were not making routine plays behind him, but he didn't. He kept encouraging his teammates."

Daniels made a fairly tough play at shortstop for the first out in the seventh inning, then made a sensational play for the second out in the inning when he charged a high-hopper over the mound and rifled the ball to first base.

"I was pretty upset at myself for making that error (in the third inning), because I make that play

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all the time," he said. "I felt bad for Sammy. He was throwing a great game. I knew I had to make those plays for him."

Lizarraga threw 104 pitches in the ballgame and Daniels had warmed up in the bullpen to pitch if needed in relief, but Lizarraga wouldn't let go of the ball. "He was determined," said Hoyer.

"Honestly, I don't know if I was ever going to stop, I felt so good," said Lizarraga.

Davenport North Coach Cory Wachal tipped his cap to Kennedy's star pitcher.

"He's tough," said Wachal, whose club finished with a 19-15 record. "He throws hard, he kept us off-balance. We knew he'd be tough to hit. We were just trying to scratch out whatever we could against him."

Gaffey reached second base with one out in the fifth inning on an infield single and an overthrow by the Davenport North shortstop. Gaffey advanced to third base on a wild pitch by Dantley Johnson. Lizarraga bunted a 2-1 pitch toward the mound and Gaffey beat Johnson's throw to the plate for the go-ahead run.

Somehow, the Cougars managed to focus on the game despite sorely missing Herkelman in the dugout.

"I'm just very proud of the kids and how they represented Kennedy. And Herk is proud of them," said Hoyer. "It's a tribute to the kids. They just stuck together."

Lizarraga said he missed having Herkelman in the dugout to discuss game situations. "But it also brought us together more as a team," he said. "It gave us something to play for and something to really work for."

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"It's been tough, especially for everyone who was close to Herk," said Daniels. "But we knew we wanted to get this one for him."

Waukee (37-4) will face Southeast Polk (31-13) in the first semifinal Friday at 5 p.m., followed by Kennedy against Iowa City West. The Cougars swept a doubleheader from Iowa City West earlier in the season, but the Trojans have been hot and have won 20 of their last 22 games.

Kennedy □ □ □ □ □ **200 010 0 - 3 5 4**

Davenport North □ **001 100 0 - 2 3 3**

W -Lizarraga (8-0). L - Johnson (7-3).