

Lizarraga will pitch for Hawkeyes

Written by Jim Ecker

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Sammy Lizarraga was all set to pack his bags and leave for Wabash Valley Community College later this month, but then he threw a bunch of 94 mph fastballs in the state tournament and things changed.

A school in the Big 12 Conference offered him a full scholarship, but he didn't want to go there. Another school that has made several trips to the College World Series in recent years came calling, but it didn't work out.

Then Iowa Coach Rick Heller, who has been chasing Lizarraga for quite some time, called and made a substantial offer that made Lizarraga smile from ear to ear on his 6-foot-5 frame.

"I verbally committed to Iowa yesterday morning," the Kennedy all-state pitcher said Tuesday afternoon. "It's really exciting. I'm excited to play DI baseball."

Lizarraga committed to Wabash Valley, a top junior college, after the high school football season last year (he was Kennedy's quarterback) and fully intended to join the team this year as a freshman.

He figured he'd pitch for Wabash for a year or two and then head to an NCAA Division I college, perhaps some place down south where it's warm, but then he struck out 14 batters in the state tournament when Kennedy beat Davenport North in the quarterfinals and things changed.

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"Definitely after that one game I had a lot more attention from D-I coaches," he said. "My phone was definitely ringing for awhile after that game."

Heller finally said the magic words and Lizarraga accepted the offer, but then came the hard part: He had to call Wabash Valley Coach Rob Fournier and tell him the news.

"That's a little uncomfortable, but he understood," Lizarraga said. "He's been through it before. He took it all right. I respect him a lot, so it was kind of hard for me to make that phone call, but he took it OK."

Lizarraga had an exceptional year for Kennedy this season with an 8-0 record and 0.70 ERA. He struck out 72 batters and issued only nine walks in 50 innings, showing pinpoint control. Opposing batters hit .159 against him this year.

Lizarraga finished his career with a 21-4 record, ranking him fourth all-time in victories for Kennedy behind only Austin Christensen, Danny Bales and Chuck Johnson. He made all the all-state teams and will play for the local Metro team in the Japan-Metro All-Star Classic at Veterans Memorial Stadium on Thursday night.

Lizarraga is joining the Hawkeyes at an exciting time. Heller led Iowa to a 41-18 record this year, a second-place finish in the Big Ten Conference standings and a trip to the NCAA tournament. The Hawkeyes won their first game in an NCAA tournament since 1972 and fans packed Duane Banks Field in Iowa City on a regular basis.

"Coach Heller and the coaching staff have taken the program in the right direction," Lizarraga said. "A big reason I'm going there is the way they treat me with total respect."

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"I really appreciate that from a coaching staff like that, because I've had a lot of guys call me and say, 'Here's this sum of money and we want you here,' without even seeing me pitch or coming to talk to me.

"They've been after me for a long time, which I respect. It's nice to have interest like that and a coaching staff that wants you that much."

All of the dorm rooms at Iowa are currently filled, so Lizarraga is not sure where he'll live in Iowa City this semester. His freshman orientation is Aug. 19 and he needs to register for classes.

"I still have quite a bit to do before I go," he said.

He'll be going with a smile.