

Christensen joins list of great Metro players

Written by Mark Dukes

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I have no idea how Austin Christensen ranks in the annals of Metro baseball. We'll leave that debate to others who have seen a whole lot more games and players.

His season is far from over, but already the Kennedy senior has compiled a .600 batting average, 13 home runs and 37 runs batted in.

The fact Christensen is hitting .600 is remarkable enough, but also consider the restraints on composite bats that were put into effect this year. The baseball isn't supposed to come off the bat like a missile, unless you're a guy with superb talent like Christensen.

I don't like to get into debates about the top players in Metro history, or even the top players at a particular school. Times are different from decade to decade. Equipment is different from year to year. You can't compare competition levels, or the players that hit before or after the great ones. And we all know official scorekeeping isn't exactly perfect some places.

I do know there have been some remarkable performances in recent history by Metro players.

You don't have to look any further than the family tree to find one. Chad Christensen averaged .550 with six triples and 17 home runs for Washington in 2008. He's now at Nebraska, waiting for Austin to join him.

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Kennedy has had some great pitching in the past, too. Dirk Dunbar, once the Jefferson baseball coach, had an incredible campaign in 1969 when he went 16-0 on the mound with a 0.33 ERA in 107 innings. More recently, Danny Bales had a 0.96 ERA and walked only three batters in 65 2/3 innings for the 2003 Cougars.

Three pitchers from the Metro area have made the major leagues. Shawn Sedlacek of Kennedy pitched in 16 games for the Kansas City Royals in 2002. Ben Ford of Washington reached the majors with the Yankees in 2000. Dick Rozek of old Immaculate Conception played five major league seasons with Cleveland and Philadelphia.

The year 1998 produced two of the top performances, and players, in Metro history in my mind. At Jefferson, Ian Mattiace walloped 23 home runs, knocked in 69 runs and averaged .556 for a J-Hawk team that reached the state semifinals under Dunbar. The home run total and average are current Metro records.

In Marion, catcher Alex Dvorsky wasn't overshadowed much by Mattiace as Dvorsky batted .527 with 16 homers and 63 RBI. They later would become teammates at Iowa.

We haven't even mentioned the Sweeney brothers, both of whom are in professional baseball. Ryan started his career at Jefferson, finished at Xavier and now is with the Oakland Athletics. His younger brother Kellen starred at Jefferson and now is in the Toronto Blue Jays organization. Prairie's Scott Schebler, Xavier's Nate Woods and Marion's Matt Holland also are in pro ball.

And there are so many others who made an impact on Metro baseball. Where to start and stop the list is difficult. There is a tendency to live in the moment and forget the accomplishments of those in preceding seasons.

At the least, though, Austin Christensen will join a nice list of others who enjoyed a remarkable high school baseball career in the Metro area.

(Mark Dukes is former sports editor of the Cedar Rapid Gazette. He is co-host of The Gym

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