

Kennedy, Marion, Prairie have eyes on state

Written by Jim Ecker

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Two Metro coaches with more than 500 wins apiece will be trying to earn a spot in the state baseball tournament tonight.

So will a young whippersnapper with 39 wins who might be the Metro Coach of the Year this season.

Bret Hoyer and Steve Fish are the cagey veterans who have combined for 1,075 victories in their high school careers. Matt Thede is the new kid on the block, but all three of them have a chance to reach the promised land tonight.

Hoyer will send No.6 Cedar Rapids Kennedy (30-8) against Dubuque Hempstead (21-18) in a Class 4A substate at Kennedy, with the Cougars trying to defend the state title they won in 2010.

Fish will send Marion High School (25-16) against Williamsburg (19-19) in a Class 3A substate at Benton Community High School, with the Indians hoping to snap a frustrating string of three straight losses in substate finals in 2008, 2009 and 2010.

Thede probably has the toughest job, taking Cedar Rapids Prairie (26-15) on the road for a battle at No.2 Mason City (32-9), but the Hawks are hot and have won 16 of their last 18 games.

All three games are scheduled to start at 7 p.m. The winners advance to the state tournament in Des Moines next week.

Hoyer has made eight trips to the state tournament in the past 11 years, capped by the school's first state title last year when the Cougars beat the Nos. 1, 2 and 3 teams in the Class

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4A rankings in three straight games.

Hoyer has made nine trips to the state tournament at Kennedy overall, with a pair of second-place finishes in 2002 and 2006. He's compiled a 503-257 record in 19 years with the Cougars and is 567-295 overall in 22 years as a head coach.

Fish has rolled up 508 victories during his career at Central City and Marion. He led the Indians to the Class 3A state tournament in 2006, but that's the only trip they've made in school history and they want another shot.

Thede has compiled a modest 39-35 record in two years at Prairie, but the Hawks enjoyed a breakthrough season this year with a school-record 26 victories and their first winning season since 1994. The Hawks have doubled their win total from 2010 when they finished 13-20 in Thede's first year. Prairie made its only trip to the state tournament in 2005.

Kennedy, Marion and Prairie have strong hitters throughout their lineups, but the Cougars have the best blend of hitting, pitching and defense. Kennedy features Austin Christensen, the 2011 Iowa Gatorade Player of the Year. Christensen is hitting .570 with 18 home runs and 52 RBIs, and as a pitcher he's a perfect 8-0.

The Cougars also feature Terrell Sykes (.446), Cody Bell (.391), Devon Jacobus (.375 with 10 homers), Logan Ambrosy (.370), Austin Benson (.360), David Yancey (.353 with seven homers) and Griffin Michael (.346). Alex Hayden has an 8-1 record and Michael is 4-3.

Marion is led by shortstop Zach Nielsen, who is hitting .446 with six homers and 52 RBIs. The Indians also feature Kasey Semler (.413), Mitch Wagner (.386), Josh Davila (.359), Andrew Charipar (.344), Trev Biery (.333) and Dusty Albaugh (.324). Tyler Hedtke is 9-3 on the mound and Levi Lochner is 6-0.

Prairie is led by D.J. Utley, who is hitting .450 with 14 homers and 50 RBIs. Brayton Carlson is hitting .439 with eight homers and 36 RBIs, and Anthony Gagliardi is sitting at .366 with 10 homers and 34 RBIs. The Hawks also feature Chaz Boots (.392), Brennan Hammer (.375) and

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Dustin Carlson (.333). Dustin Carlson has a 7-3 record and Gagliardi is 6-3.