

Prairie sending message in Metro tourney

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Prairie Hawks won 31 games last season and captured the first Mississippi Valley Conference baseball title in school history, yet they were completely snubbed in the preseason rankings this year despite have a veteran club.

Their first two opponents this year have paid the price.

Prairie smacked the Washington Warriors, 15-0, in four innings Tuesday night in the semifinals of the Metro baseball tournament for their second impressive victory in two days.

The Hawks began the year Monday night with a 3-2 victory over the third-ranked Jefferson J-Hawks. Now they'll get a shot at fifth-ranked Kennedy in the tournament finals Wednesday night at Jefferson.

"I think our guys know that we got zero votes, so we told them you spell respect W-I-N," Prairie Coach Todd Rima said after the Hawks overwhelmed Washington. "That's what we'll do and we'll let people decide the rankings."

The Hawks are not obsessed with the rankings, but they certainly noticed that not a single coach who votes in the IHSBCA poll thought they deserved a spot in the top 10.

"It motivated us," said third baseman Cooper Reittinger. "We didn't feel like we got the respect we deserved. So we came out and we've tried to earn some votes here. That's what really drove us these couple of games."

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Kennedy blanked Mount Vernon, 1-0, in the other semifinal Tuesday night to earn a spot in the championship game against Prairie. Jefferson spanked Xavier, 11-3, and Marion topped Linn-Mar, 7-4, in consolation games.

Here is the schedule for the third and final round of the Metro tournament Wednesday night:

1st place - Prairie (2-0) vs Kennedy (2-0), at Jefferson, 7 p.m.

3rd place - Washington (1-1) vs Mount Vernon (1-1), at Cornell College, 7

5th place - Jefferson (1-1) vs Marion (1-1), at Jefferson, 5 p.m.

7th place - Xavier (0-2) vs Linn-Mar (0-2), at Cornell College, 5 p.m.

Prairie began its season with an exclamation point Monday night by beating Jefferson and all-star pitcher Spencer VanScoyoc in a battle worthy of the state tournament.

"That kind of jump-started our season, I would say," Prairie all-state shortstop Cal Clark remarked. "We prepared for that all three weeks of practice. We knew it would be a tough battle, but we knew we could go out there and beat him."

Prairie overwhelmed Washington in the semifinals, beginning with a five-run outburst in the first inning. The Hawks added two runs in the second inning and exploded for eight more runs in the third for a 15-0 lead.

Tyler Nunemaker went 3-for-3 with two RBIs. Reitinger was 2-for-2 with a two-run homer, sacrifice fly and RBI double. Clark went 2-for-3 with a double and the Hawks played flawless defense.

Keegan Sanborn tossed a three-hit shutout for Prairie.

The Hawks have an experienced ballclub this year with high hopes, but one key piece of the puzzle is not playing baseball this season. Jalen Rima, the coach's son, is skipping his senior

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year so he can report to the University of Northern Iowa in early June to get ready for his college football career with the Panthers.

Rima is a star receiver and kick return specialist and has a chance to play for Northern Iowa as a freshman. He won four gold medals at the state track meet last week in the 100, 200 and 400 meter dashes and the 4x100 relay, but he's finished his high school career and is looking forward to college.

"I keep telling him we have a jersey for him," Coach Rima joked after the game Tuesday. "But he's excited to be there, and you know what? I'm happy for him. And we're going to coach the 24 guys that we've got here and they're working their butts off.

"We'd love to have him, but we don't. And we're going to make the most of what we have, and that's a great group of kids.

"I told him I was proud of him and I completely understand for him," said Rima. "He's doing what he has to do. It's the right thing."

The Hawks would love to have Rima in center field, but they are determined to have a successful campaign without him.

"We're not going to settle for anything less than a state championship," said Reittinger. "We're going to keep working hard and keep practicing and keep doing our thing."