

Kennedy golfers swing with the best

Written by Jim Ecker

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It's not a dynasty unless you win some state titles, but the Kennedy golfers have come close.

Their performances at the Class 4A tournament the past five years have been remarkable. Kind of a mini-dynasty, but without the big prize, without the gold medal.

The Cougars finished second at the state tournament Saturday at the Tournament Club of Iowa in Polk City, trimmed by a single shot by Waukee.

It was Kennedy's latest impressive showing at state, and it was accomplished by a young team that featured four sophomores in the starting lineup.

The mini-dynasty began in 2008 when the Cougars placed third at the state tournament. Now they've finished 3rd, 4th, 2nd, 4th and 2nd in five consecutive years.

"Pretty awesome," said Mark Wilden, who has been Kennedy's head coach since 1999.

The Cougars graduated five seniors from last year's club. Harrison Moore played in the state meet in 2011, but it was a new experience for all his teammates this past weekend.

They did extremely well.

"No one thought we were going to be the top dog this year," Wilden said. "We're pretty pleased with how things turned out."

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"We're not crying in our beer or milk or whatever. The kids played awesome. They really performed."

The Cougars were trimmed by Waukee, 617-618, after holding a one-shot lead on Friday. Sometimes, it's easier to lose by 10 or 20 shots so you don't blame yourself for one errant shot that could have made the difference.

Davis Sutton 3-putted his final hole Saturday. Sink that second putt and the Cougars are in a playoff. "He thinks it's his fault," Wilden said.

Conner Koberg had two bogeys and a double-bogey on his last four holes. "He think it's his fault," the coach said.

Cole Murdock took a 9 on one hole. "And he thinks it's his fault," Wilden said. "They're all blaming themselves. You can't do that to yourself. It's not fair.

"They were angry they got second, because they felt they should have gotten first."

Wilden feels their pain, but stressed how well they played in the entire tournament. "I don't want anyone to think it slipped away," he said. "Waukee won it.

"Every meet there are many things that happen. There's an ebb and flow, a yin and yang."

They played 36 holes in the tournament in cold weather. There were lots of good shots and a few bad ones.

"You can't say it was that bad one, because there were a lot of good ones during the round. Other teams can say the same thing," Wilden noted.

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If anyone should be frustated, it's Wilden. He's had to settle for the silver medal instead of the gold in 2001, 2010 and 2012. In addition, he had the top-ranked team in 2002 and never made it to the state meet.

"That's frustration," he acknowledged.

He's a little frustrated, but more proud than anything else with five straight top-4 finishes at the state tournament. "Even Valley can't say that now," he noted.

West Des Moines Valley, the defending champs, were ranked No. 1 this year and the heavy favorites to win another crown. The Tigers finished a distant seventh this time.

Wilden is proud of the way his golfers played, but also proud of the way they conducted themselves as gentlemen. The Johnston coach said he was happy to see his players in the same pairings with Kennedy, because he knew the Cougars would be fun to play with and make it an enjoyable round.

"That's a really nice compliment," Wilden said.

The Xavier Saints, who tied for eighth at the state meet, also saluted the Cougars by wearing purple ribbons on their caps, a tribute to Drew Wall, the cancer-stricken member of the Kennedy golf team who has inspired the Cougars this season.

Wilden greatly appreciates acts of sportsmanship like that. In return, he teaches his players to respect the other team and respect the game in friendly competition.

"We want the other kids on the other teams to do well, but we want to do better," he remarked, laughing. "What can I say?"

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Wilden, 56, is a special education instructor at Kennedy and also teaches driver's education. Toss in 45 guys on the golf team and it's been a busy time of year.

"My life now becomes a little bit simpler," he said.

Wilden, who played golf at Cornell College, is already looking forward to the 2013 campaign.

"We'll have a good team next year," he said. "I'm not saying we're going to be world beaters, but we'll be there."

It's not a dynasty, but they've been darn close.