

## **Strellner tosses gem as Kohawks win title**

Written by Jim Ecker

Saturday, 12 May 2012 18:17 -

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Ben Strellner pitched the best game of his career for Coe College Saturday afternoon.

His timing was perfect.

Strellner tossed a complete game as the Kohawks tamed Buena Vista, 4-1, in the championship game of the Iowa Conference tournament at Veterans Memorial Stadium to earn the league's automatic berth in the NCAA regional tournament.

Strellner, a compact left-hander from Linn-Mar High School, allowed only six hits in nine innings as he kept the Beavers off-balance with his fastball, curveball and changeup.

Coe Coach Steve Cook got somebody warmed up in the bullpen in the late innings, just in case, but Strellner brushed the thought aside.

"I told Coach Cook after the eighth inning - he was talking to Coach (James) Nelson, our pitching coach - I told him, 'I've got it, leave me out there. And he said, 'I know, I know.'

"I just tried to keep going as long as I could."

Strellner retired the side in the top of the ninth on a ground ball, an easy fly ball and another infield grounder. His biggest problem was surviving the dog-pile that formed on top of him after the final out was recorded.

Strellner was an all-Metro and all-conference performer at Linn-Mar, graduating in 2009, and he was delighted to get the ball in the championship game of the Iowa Conference tournament at the local minor league ballpark.

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"It was awesome. It's awesome to play here," he said. "I'm glad we got to play here. A lot of family and friends were out here watching, so it's awesome to finish it here in Cedar Rapids."

The Kohawks (27-15) will play in the NCAA regional tournament this coming week at a site to be determined.

Coe won three straight games to capture the tournament, but the Kohawks looked a little wobbly at times in the first two rounds with a 10-9 victory over Wartburg and a 12-11 decision over Buena Vista in the semifinals. Strellner pitched mostly in relief this season and started only two games prior to the tournament, but he was the starting pitcher in the biggest game of the year so far.

"Every time we put him out there, he's winning baseball games for us," said Cook. "He throws a lot of strikes, he throws three pitches on the plate. You can't ask for much more out of a kid."

Strellner has compiled a 6-1 record with a sparkling 2.90 earned run average this year. He doesn't blow the ball by anybody with a low-80's fastball, but mixes his pitches, spots the ball to different parts of the plate and keeps hitters off-balance.

He walked only one batter and fanned only one Saturday. He got 16 outs on fly balls, eight outs on groundouts and benefitted from two double-plays and excellent defense behind him in the field.

"I pitch to contact," he said. "I'm not looking to strike a lot of guys out. If I do that's great, but most of the time it's ground balls and pop-ups."

Strellner has struck out 16 batters this season in 40.1 innings with just five walks.

"He's always under control out there," said Cook. "He never seems rattled, he doesn't mind pitching with guys on base."

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"His demeanor is really where it starts. We needed that today. We needed somebody to come in and command their position. We couldn't have picked a better guy than Ben Strellner."

Strellner missed the end of the 2011 campaign with a shoulder injury that required surgery. He's healthy now and on his way to the NCAA regionals with the Iowa Conference tournament champions.