

Niemeyer fondly recalls 1983 state title

Written by Mark Dukes

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Metro high school softball, and girls' sports in general, were in their infancy 30 years ago. Many teams did not even have their own fields, let alone lights. The feeder programs so prevalent today were non-existent. Girls' sports simply were not a priority.

Larry Niemeyer went to Cedar Rapids Jefferson in 1978 and soon took over the softball program. He had been a successful coach at Adel, winning a state championship in the fall of 1970 among nine state appearances.

"There was hardly any (softball) culture at all back then," Niemeyer said. "At that time, there was a rule girls couldn't play until the summer of their sophomore year. Now they can play five years."

This summer marks the 30th anniversary of Jefferson's – and the Metro's – first state softball title. It was achieved in a one-class tournament (there are five classes now). The J-Hawks defeated Turkey Valley, 5-4, in the 1983 championship game.

"That was a big thrill," Niemeyer said. "For me, it was the first time someone had coached two different schools to a state title. It gave me a lot of confidence, I think.

"It was always my goal to get to the state tournament. You had to win four games to get there back then because it was only one class. Now some teams get there with two wins. It was much more difficult to get to state back then."

Jefferson was buoyed by the arm of pitcher Tracy Langhurst, who had transferred to Jefferson from Washington. The J-Hawks finished 49-3 in '83 but had to endure a difficult tournament trail.

"We had a good pitcher and some pretty good kids ... one of the Aschbrenner girls, Kathy Kelsey, Sonya Feaker," Niemeyer said. "To this day, Tracy had the best changeup I've ever seen. Ever. Her dad (Perry) taught her that pitch. Sometimes we'd throw it six times in a row.

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"We had to go to Ottumwa and face a real tough team in the regional final, and we won it 2-1 on a Sonya Feaker hit over the outfielder's head. The first game at state, we had a real tough team in Dubuque Senior and won it in 16 innings. Our second game went something like 14 of 15 innings.

"Tracy had some arm problems late that year and she'd been to two or three different doctors. The trainers would have to rub down her arm before every game. What she did was just remarkable."

Niemeyer credits then-Jefferson principal William Jacobson with giving the softball program tremendous support. What is now Larry Niemeyer Field was built, lights were purchased from the Cedar Rapids minor-league baseball club and erected.

Niemeyer had tremendous parental support and a competitive Cedar Hills Booster Club program that developed players under Bill Condran. Later, the Blue Devils program under Glen Johnson was started and constantly produced future J-Hawk stars.

Jefferson, with 19 state tournament trips and three state titles, still is the only Metro area team to win a state championship in softball.

"Back then I just think we put more emphasis on it," Niemeyer said. "Softball has always been important to me. We probably outworked everybody else too. We were ahead of everyone else in the city at that point."

Niemeyer, the winningest softball coach in the country with 2,089 victories in 52 seasons, is spending his first summer in decades away from the field. He was released by Jefferson after last season. He took the Waterloo West job but had to back out of that due to a kidney infection.

He recently returned from Chicago to watch his beloved Cubs. He also keeps busy watching

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his four grandchildren compete in sports, taking in a few softball games and assisting area coaches with basketball camps.

"I do miss coaching," he said. "There always comes a time when it ends. I don't know if I'll ever do it again, or whether I'll have the opportunity. My health is under control and I really feel pretty good from that standpoint. So I'm enjoying having a summer off."

This year marks a couple other anniversaries for Jefferson softball. It was 15 years ago that the J-Hawks went 55-2 for the second year in a row and won their second straight state title. And 10 years ago, Niemeyer had perhaps one of his best teams, but that 52-1 club lost in the state semifinals to West Des Moines Valley, 3-2.

Jefferson earned its 20th state tournament berth Tuesday with a 7-0 victory over No.1 Muscatine. The J-Hawks now are coached by Brian Erbe, a former Niemeyer assistant.

It's a program steeped in tradition, sparked by a special season 30 summers ago.