

Versatile J-Hawks ready for state tourney

Written by Tom Fruehling

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One of the secrets to the success of the Jefferson softball program over the years is that few of its players are ever one-dimensional.

As the J-Hawks begin play Tuesday in the state tournament for the 20th time in the past 31 years, for instance, leading slugger Maddie Hansen prides herself for defensive skills as a catcher.

Even when she's not on the mound as a pitcher, Brooke Stauffer is in the starting lineup as a solid hitter.

First-year pitching sensation Alyssa Olson is an exception, but it's rare for the girls to do just one thing well. On and off the diamond.

Take the seven seniors on this season's 31-11 tourney-bound team. As a group, they've compiled a cumulative 4.1 grade point average (A+) over their four years in high school.

One of them, first baseman Maddie Koolbeck, led her class with an astronomical 4.6 GPA.

She and teammates Dani Stromert (seventh out of 320 students with a 4.35) and Kaitlyn Davidson (3.76) were also starters on the Jefferson basketball squad.

And in a not-too-common scenario, all three of them plan to play the two major sports as well as study next year at four-year colleges.

"I love them both," explains Stromert, a smooth southpaw center fielder who's hitting .371 in the leadoff spot and will attend Loras College in the fall. "I couldn't give one up. I didn't want to choose and then regret later I didn't play both."

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Sports has been a way of life for the three as far back as they can remember.

Coolidge elementary products Stromert and Koolbeck (a .333 hitter in the No.5 hole) played on the same Blue Devils softball team for three years.

Hoover elementary alum Davidson (a slick-fielding second baseman who hit .421 in the No.2 spot behind Stromert) played with them for two of three seasons, but was on a different Blue Devils team for one year.

The trio also started AAU basketball at a young age. Playing basketball and softball in college will be demanding, but they are confident they can do it.

"They're in opposite seasons," says Davidson, who will major in elementary education at Mount Mercy University. "So it's always worked out. There will be some overlap in college, but the coaches are really good about it."

Koolbeck, the leading scorer on the J-Hawk basketball team the past two years, will combine athletics at Coe College with economics and environmental studies. She's used to juggling a variety of tasks.

A senior class officer, she was also editor of the highly regarded school newspaper and a committed community volunteer. "You learn to manage your time," the Jeff valedictorian says. "But it teaches you responsibility."

In this day and age, when children seem to be steered into specializing in only one sport, J-Hawk softball Coach Brian Erbe, for one, values the well-rounded student athlete.

"These girls are able to wisely balance everything that they do," says Erbe, a longtime facilitator

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at Jefferson who has seen them grow up for four years.

“Looking at the big picture, they’re not only great athletes but they’re also excellent students. And they are wonderful role models for our younger players.

“All of our seniors make good decisions and do things the right way. That’s what has kept this program strong. The younger kids look up to them and want to be like the older girls.”

The 10th-ranked J-Hawks (31-11) will play No.3 Ottumwa (36-6) in the opening round of the state tournament Tuesday at 7:30 p.m. in Fort Dodge.