

J-Hawks edge Rams for trip to state

Written by Tom Fruehling

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With two hard-nosed, hard-throwing softball pitchers at their very best, games usually turn on a crucial play or two.

The always fundamentally sound Jefferson girls got two key hits when they needed them Tuesday night and a late-game defensive gem to squeak out a 1-0 win over tough-as-nails Dubuque Senior.

With its second straight regional championship under Coach Brian Erbe, the sixth-ranked J-Hawks (34-6) move on next week to their 21st state tournament berth at Fort Dodge.

Jefferson (34-6) will face No. 3 Southeast Polk (28-9) on Tuesday, July 22 at 11:30 a.m.

“We kind of knew this would be a pitcher’s duel,” said Jefferson junior left fielder Hannah Towns, who had written the words “work hard” on her left forearm for batting inspiration.

Jefferson ace Alyssa Olson (16-5 with 164 strikeouts and a stingy 0.76 ERA) was on the mound for her team. But they were up against big, rocket-armed senior A.J. Medinger, who had shut them out the last two times the teams met.

“I think I got a hit off her a month ago,” Towns recalled. “But I mostly struck out. We didn’t do

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much against her.”

Erbe was well aware.

“She’s a big-game pitcher, and I told her that tonight,” he said. “We knew that to beat her we had to have our best effort.”

After striking out in her first at-bat Tuesday, Towns came up in the fourth inning with two outs and Erin Kuba on third.

“I just knew I had to get her in somehow, some way,” Towns said.

When Medinger fired her pitch on the inside part of the plate, Towns laced a line drive down the left field line that rolled under the fence for a ground-rule double.

“I was really excited,” said Towns. “There were times before this year when I needed a hit in clutch situations and they didn’t fall in for me. This time it did.”

Kuba led off the inning with a hard single to center, advanced to second on a bunt by Emily Walton and barely made it to third safely on a fly-out to right by Tori Brandon.

Kuba and Medinger are close friends who played together for several years on the Eastern Iowa Baracudas club team. She knew what the J-Hawks were up against.

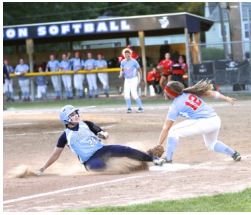
“She’s a really good pitcher who gets batters to pop up a lot,” Kuba noted. “I was looking for a pitch middle-in, and when she threw me one I wasn’t going to let it go by.”

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“And when I scored, I could breathe a little easier.”



Olson, too, felt more at ease going into the fifth inning with a one-run lead. She'd held Senior to four hits to that point and fanned eight, including all three in the first inning. Three runners had reached as far as second base.

Bothered lately by tendinitis, the junior rise-ball specialist said she felt at the top of her game.

“When we got the lead,” she said, “I told my teammates just to think like it was still zero-zero at the start.

“I didn't want us to get ahead of ourselves. I was trying to keep everybody else calm.”

Olson coolly worked the fifth and sixth without a threat, but it took a defensive play in the seventh to avoid potential trouble.

After whiffing the first hitter, Olson gave up a sharp single to center. The next batter laid down a perfect bunt in no-man's land in front of the plate.

Kuba rushed in from third and fired a bullet to second baseman Avery Guy at first to get the second out.

“I had to throw it off of my front leg,” Kuba related. “I knew the girl was pretty fast, and I had to get rid of it. It was kind of off the base, but Avery made a great play to stretch for it.”

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Right fielder Walton then caught a fly in foul territory to end the game.

“That was a great play by Erin and Avery,” Erbe said. “It’s the kind of thing we work on all the time. At that point in the game, we had to get outs. And that’s the kind of play you have to have in a game like this one.”

It’s the kind of play that gets a team to the state tournament.