

J-Hawks claim first MVC title since 2005

Written by Metro Sports Report
Monday, 13 July 2015 22:18



The Jefferson J-Hawks needed three more outs to capture their first Mississippi Valley Conference title in 10 years Monday night, so Kyle Rodenkirk did what any smart coach would do.

He gave the ball to his best pitcher and relaxed.

Spencer VanScoyoc pitched a spotless inning in the top of the seventh as the third-ranked J-Hawks trimmed Dubuque Hempstead, 3-2, in the second game of their doubleheader to claim a share of the Valley Division title in the MVC.

Jefferson and Iowa City West tied for the crown with identical 20-6 records in the conference. The J-Hawks and Trojans split their doubleheader this year, with each team winning a one-run ballgame, so they were truly tied at the top.

Jefferson could have won an outright title Monday by sweeping the twinbill from Hempstead, but the Mustangs posted a 7-2 victory in the first game at the Jefferson field.

The J-Hawks relished the title and rewarded their coach by dumping a bucket of ice water on his head and back. It was good, clean fun for the champions from the southwest side of Cedar Rapids.

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"The seniors stuck with it through my three years. It felt pretty sweet for them to share it," said Rodenkirk, a Jefferson grad.

"I just told those guys, it's something people can never take away from them. You'll always have this memory. It's nice to get off the 10-year schneid.

"The boys deserved it," said Rodenkirk. "You wish you would have come in here and got two (wins), but it's late in the season, a hot day and they (the Mustangs) are a darn good team."

VanScoyoc is scheduled to pitch the Class 4A substate opener against North Scott Friday night at home, so Rodenkirk wanted to take it as easy as possible on his ace left-hander and keep him fresh for Friday.

"I wasn't going to go more than an inning with him, no matter what the score was," he said.

An inning is all it took. VanScoyoc threw 15 pitches and got three ground balls to his shortstop, second baseman and third baseman to end the game and begin the championship celebration.

"It's exciting. It's the first one (title) in 10 years," said VanScoyoc. "This whole year has been exciting. It's kind of like redeeming Jefferson baseball and bringing it all back."

Hempstead tried its best to spoil the party for the J-Hawks. The Mustangs took an early 2-0 lead in the nightcap and nearly made it 4-0 in the third inning, but Jefferson first baseman Colton Knox made a sensational diving stop of a ground ball with the bases loaded and flipped to his pitcher for the third out to keep two runs off the scoreboard.

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That defensive play appeared to spark the J-Hawks, who responded with three runs in the bottom of the third to grab a 3-2 lead. Knox began the rally by getting hit by a pitch, then Jared Eivins bunted pinch-runner Carter Schmitz to second base.

VanScoyoc pulled the J-Hawks within 2-1 with a two-out single to left field and advanced to second base on a wild pitch. He scored the tying run on an RBI single by Lucas Larson, then Larson scored all the way from first base on a single by Manny Olutunde when the Hempstead center fielder booted the ball.

Sam Meyer started the second game on the mound for the J-Hawks and struck out the side in the first inning, but he ran into control problems and was relieved by Zach Szabo in the third inning. Szabo got six big outs, then Knox moved to the mound from first base with one out in the fifth inning and got five key outs before giving the ball to VanScoyoc in the seventh.

Szabo was credited with his second victory of the season in the biggest game of the year so far.

Knox played a key role in the victory with his defensive gem at first base, getting hit by a pitch in the three-run third inning and taking his turn on the mound.

"I do anything but catch, pretty much," said Knox. "I'm a utility player, you can say. Whatever Coach wants me to do, I'll do it. I enjoy it."

Knox celebrated the MVC title with his teammates, but quickly turned his attention to Friday and the substate opener at home against North Scott. "Friday is when it counts the most," he said.

VanScoyoc went 4-for-7 in the twinbill with two RBIs.

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Jefferson will take a 29-8 record and No. 1 seed into the substate tournament. Dubuque Hempstead is 20-15 overall and finished 16-10 in the conference.

GAME 1

Hempstead 001 003 3 - 7
Jefferson 000 001 1 - 2

W - Cooksley. L - Konigsmark.

GAME 2

Hempstead 011 000 0 - 2
Jefferson 003 000 x - 3

W - Szabo. L - Duax. S - S. VanScoyoc.