

No. 3 J-Hawks nipped by No. 2 Johnston

Written by Jim Ecker

Thursday, 23 July 2015 19:17 - Last Updated Thursday, 23 July 2015 19:33



FORT DODGE - Erin Kuba dreamed about big situations like this when she was growing up in Palo across the street from the city ballpark.

State softball tournament, playing the defending champions, 1-0 ballgame, runners on second and third, two outs, time running out. A key base hit and her team probably wins the game.

"Yeah, I like being in that situation," she said Thursday evening.

Unfortunately, the dream did not have a happy ending. Kuba popped up, the inning ended and her team ended up losing by one run instead of winning by a run.

The third-ranked Jefferson J-Hawks were trimmed by second-ranked Johnston, 2-1, in the semifinals of the Class 5A state tournament Thursday at Harlan Rogers Park in a snappy 80-minute contest.

It certainly was not -- it DEFINITELY was not -- Kuba's fault in any way, shape or form. But it was an opportunity that popped up in a well-played game between two quality teams with two quality pitchers.

"You couldn't have scripted it up any better. Right girl, right spot," said Jefferson Coach Brian Erbe, happy to have Kuba hitting in that situation. "We had some speed on the bases. It was a good situation for us.

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"She just missed that pitch. She JUST missed," he said. "Another half-inch, that ball is in the gap and we have two runs and win the game, 2-1, I think."

Kuba put a good swing on the ball, but popped it up to the first baseman.

"I got underneath it a little," said Kuba, a .468 hitter when the tournament began. "I didn't quite get the middle."

Johnston took a quick 1-0 lead in the top of the first inning with two doubles and a bunt, but Jefferson hurler Alyssa Olson settled into a good rhythm and it stayed 1-0 all the way into the seventh inning as she matched pitches with Johnston star Haylee Towers in a battle of premium all-state hurlers.

Towers took a no-hitter into the fifth inning, but Kennedy Dighton snapped the no-hitter with a leadoff single. The J-Hawks did not do any more damage in the fifth, but it relieved the pressure and set the stage for the bottom of the sixth.

Tori Brandon ripped a two-out single to left field for the J-Hawks and Maddie Hansen hit a double that fell just inside the left-field line, sending pinch-runner Kaylee Donner to third base. Sydney Briney ran for Hansen and Kuba, the clean-up hitter, strode to the plate with thoughts of putting her team ahead.



It did not happen, but not for lack of effort.

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Johnston made it 2-0 in the top of the seventh against Olson, making the assignment against Towers in the bottom of the seventh even tougher for the J-Hawks.

Hannah Towns gave the Jefferson fans something to cheer about when she belted a home run off Towers to center field, making it 2-1 with one out, but Towers got the last two outs on a strikeout and ground ball.

"She's a great pitcher," said Towns, who hit her ninth home run of the season. "She had a lot of movement. She had a rise-ball and a really good curveball. Myself, I couldn't stay off the rise-ball until my last at-bat."

Towers, a junior, has a 23-1 record and ERA of approximately 0.40. She has already committed to play Division I softball at Western Kentucky.

Jefferson played a good game, but the 2014 state champions were just a little better.

"Definitely not too shabby there," said Olson, who will pitch at Coe College next year. "We knew they were going to come out hungry. They're the defending state champs. We knew we had to try and take away power from their power hitters, which I think we did pretty effectively.

"They got runners on, but we worked our way out of it."

Olson allowed six hits, with five strikeout and one walk. Towers tossed a four-hitter, with eight strikeouts and no walks.

"It was a pleasure to be on the diamond with them," said Erbe, "and as far as I'm concerned we didn't really lose -- they beat us.

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"I feel like we were just as good and just as competitive as they are. On any given day, if we get a key hit here, a key hit there and they don't get a key hit ..."

Jefferson (36-8) will face top-ranked West Des Moines Valley (36-7) for third place at 3:30 p.m. Friday. West Des Moines Valley lost to fifth-ranked Waukee, 4-3, in nine innings in the other semifinal Thursday.

"Third is definitely important," said Towns, eager to play again. "We still want to go out with a win, so I think we'll bounce back."

"We obviously aren't done," said Olson. "We've got that game tomorrow. We're going to come out ready to fire. We definitely weren't here to come in third, but we're not going to throw this last game away."

Johnston will play Waukee (36-8) for the Class 5A title at 4:45 p.m. Friday. This will be the 13th straight year that a team from the CIML conference will win the state title.

Johnston □ 100 000 1 - 2 6 2

Jefferson □ 000 000 1 - 1 4 0

W - Towers (23-1). L - Olson (19-5).