

J-Hawks relying on 'Pete' to get back to state

Written by Tom Fruehling
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Just call her "Pete," like everyone else does.

"If someone says 'Hannah,' my teammates are like, 'Who's that?'," says Hannah "Pete" Petersen, ace pitcher for the past five years for the Jefferson softball team.

She's also a slugger from the left side of the plate, with a career batting average well over .300 (and close to .400 this year).

But it's on her strong left arm that the J-Hawks depend. It's capable of blowing the ball past batters.

But Pete is plenty craft, too, with dippy-dos and changeups in her arsenal. Veteran Coach Larry Niemeyer's team is loaded with solid hitters from top to bottom. And the defense, as always, is air-tight.

But it takes a top pitcher to make it to the top at state tournament time. And Niemeyer, who's been around the game for 52 years and has coached more victories (2,085) than anyone ever in high school softball history, knows he has an outstanding one.

"Pitching is 90 percent of the game," he says. "Without a good pitcher, you can't compete. You're a 50-50 team, at best. And it becomes even more important in the tournament."

Then, it's one and done.

"When I put Pete's name on the lineup card, the kids just assume we're going to win. They play better. She gives the rest of the team more confidence.

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"They know that with her pitching, we can beat anybody."

And this year, Petersen and her five fellow seniors are on a mission.

"We've had one goal all year," she says. "We want to win the state tournament before we're done. And we want to win it for Mr. Niemeyer."

The heart-and-soul of this J-Hawk team are those six seniors: Rachel Sedlacek, Kailey Drake, Kenna Fry, Hannah McInerney, Carson Burgart and Petersen.

They all grew up on softball, playing in Cedar Hills leagues as little girls.

"And we've played together since we were nine, all of us on the Blue Devils," explains Petersen of the westside feeder team for the Jefferson varsity. "That's when I got I got my nickname. Everybody called my dad (Todd) 'Pete', so I became Pete, too."

Petersen started on the mound for the high school team as an eighth grader, and before the season was done was the team's stopper. She went 18-3 that first year with an earned run average of 0.50 and was named third team all-state.

The following season she was 15-3, hit .359 and was picked on the second all-state team as a utility player.

Both Jefferson squads made it to the state tournament, a regular occurrence for Niemeyer-coached teams, but lost in the semifinals in 2008 and in the opening game in 2009. They haven't made it back since.

"I've never seen Pete and the others more focused than they have been this year," says their

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coach. "They know what they're after."

Going into their final two games of the regular season Tuesday against Dubuque Wahlert, the J-Hawks are 33-5, have clinched the Valley Division title at 23-1 and are ranked fourth in Class 5A. Petersen is 16-3 while her junior understudy Brooke Stauffer sports a 15-1 mark.

"In doubleheaders, I pitch Pete first," Niemeyer says. "She gets us off on the right foot."

Her statistics, as they have been throughout her career, have been sparkling.

In her sophomore year, when she was named second team all-state as a pitcher, she was 17-5 with 193 strikeouts and 47 walks in 142 innings pitched. Her ERA that year was 1.80.

Last year, as a first team all-stater, she compiled an 18-4 record with an ERA of 0.88. Teams batted just .138 against her, and she tallied 177 strikeouts with only 24 walks in 144 innings.

Coincidentally, she has the exact same number of strikeouts this year along with 22 bases on balls over 119 innings. Petersen's earned run average is a minuscule 0.70, and opponents are hitting only .111.

For her career, she has an 84-18 record.

The hard-throwing 18-year-old southpaw has been first team all-district four years in a row, three times has been the MVC Valley Division player of the year and last year was the Metro player of the year.

A salutatorian of her graduating class with a grade point average above 4.0, she'll attend Mount Mercy University this year to major in biology with any eye on becoming a physical therapist. Of

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course, she'll play softball for the Mustangs as well.

First things, first, however. The Jefferson girls have an elusive state title to chase. And as Pete goes, so go the J-Hawks.

"She's our leader, no question about it," says Niemeyer. "She's grown and matured so much in these past five years. She's been through ups and downs.

"But Pete's a veteran out there, and she has a real positive influence on the other kids. As a coach, I couldn't ask for anyone better."

Jefferson opens regional tournament play Saturday at home against either Waterloo West or Cedar Falls. The regional final is slated to be played at Jefferson on July 10 against either Davenport West or Davenport Central.