

Cougars rock Tigers in substate final

Written by Mike Condon

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Believe it or not, there was actually a little suspense in Wednesday night's Class 4A substate final between Kennedy and Cedar Falls.

It lasted about all of 15 minutes.

The Cougars survived a first-inning case of the jitters to keep the visiting Tigers off the scoreboard.

From that point on, it was all Kennedy. The Cougars scored four runs in each of the first two innings, then added 10 in the third en route to an 18-1, four-inning win over a pitching-strapped Cedar Falls squad at Herkelman Field, earning a second straight trip to state.

Coach Bret Hoyer's team (29-11) got the No. 2 seed and will meet No. 7 seed Davenport North (19-14) in a state quarterfinal game at 5 p.m. next Wednesday at Principal Park in Des Moines. This will be the Cougars' 13th trip to state in Hoyer's 23 years as Kennedy head coach. They won a state title in 2010.

Cedar Falls closes its season at 22-14.

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Hoyer looked quite relaxed as he watched his players accept their state tournament banner after the game. He was anything but about 90 minutes earlier.

Kennedy starting pitcher Sammy Lizarraga was admittedly nervous as he took the mound. The senior right-hander walked the first two batters.

Cedar Falls' Jace Lang then grounded to third where Bryce Church got the force, but overthrew first, putting Tiger runners at second and third with one out.

Lizarraga took control of things himself at that point, getting called third strikes on Ben Fienup and Trey Bronner to end the threat.

"That was big," Hoyer said of the Cougars getting out of the first. "Obviously in a substate final there is anxiety and tension and we played through it. We were fortunate to get out of it without giving up any runs."



Zach Daniels walked to lead off the Kennedy first and he came around to score on Mitchell Gaffey's double to left-center.

"Mitchell's hit really got us going," Hoyer said. "We put four up there and that helped."

Jackson Behn squeezed home the second run. Kyle Brewer and Matt Berst followed with RBI hits and the rout was on.

"It was nice getting a 4-spot in that first inning," said Lizarraga. "That definitely made things a lot easier."

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Kennedy also benefitted from facing a weary Tiger pitching staff. After edging Marshalltown, 5-4, in the first round last Friday, Cedar Falls had to battle 11 innings, using four pitchers, to beat Linn-Mar, 7-6, on Monday night. Tigers Coach Nick Klein used five pitchers, three of which saw the mound against Linn-Mar.

"I'm sure that made a difference," Hoyer said. "That's part of the deal. That happens in the game. You really fight like crazy through those first 30 games to get a high seed so you aren't in that position."

Daniels' triple to right was the key blow in a four-run second for the Cougars. The third saw Kennedy send 15 batters to the plate, scoring 10 times on six hits. Jacob Henry belted a two-run homer over the left-field fence during the onslaught.

All that was left was for Lizarraga to finish the job in the fourth. He gave up a two-out single to Brady Corson, but fanned Drew Marchesani to end the game. The Kennedy ace struck out four and walked three.

"I don't think I have ever pitched with a lead that big, at least in high school," he said. "We've got ahead on teams in the past and have let up on the gas. We didn't want that to happen tonight."

Lizarraga is one of 11 seniors on the Cougar roster. He said nothing will change as they prepare for their final week in Kennedy uniforms.

"We're going to approach (state) just like we approach any other game," Lizarraga said. "We're just going to practice well."

Hoyer was beaming with pride as he spoke about taking his 13th Kennedy team to state.

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"It never gets old," he said. "It's a new group of kids every year and you're happy to see them experience what so many other Kennedy teams have experienced. They dream about (state) and it is pretty rewarding to watch their faces light up when they achieve it."

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Kennedy ▯ 44(10) x - 18 13 2

Austin Marchesani, Zack Thompson (1), Hayden Schultz (3), Caleb Townsend (3), Rawley Ficklin (3) and Matt Turcotte. Sammy Lizarraga and Matt Berst. WP - Lizarraga (7-0). LP - Schultz (5-3). HR - Jacob Henry (K).