

Prairie claims 1st Metro baseball title

Written by Jim Ecker

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When Todd Rima became the new baseball coach at Cedar Rapids Prairie last year, he gave all of his players a picture of Principal Park in Des Moines and told them to set their sights on winning a state title there.

"We asked them to hang it up in their room and make sure it was something they wanted to work towards," Rima said Wednesday night. "I think they looked at me at first like, 'Is this guy crazy?' But I think they bought in. I think they have a confidence about them now that leads to success."

That confidence was on full display Wednesday as the Hawks claimed their first Metro title in school history with a 5-0 whitewash of fifth-ranked Kennedy at the Jefferson field.

The Hawks enjoyed a breakthrough year in 2015, winning 31 games and capturing the first Mississippi Valley Conference in school annals. Now they've followed last year's success with their first trophy in the 47th Bob Vrbicek Metro tournament.

"We felt with the kids that we had and how they wanted to work and how they wanted to be successful that we could have a lot of success," said Rima. "It's all because they've bought in to playing hard. They've done a tremendous job."

Junior Darren Kilpatrick tossed a four-hit shutout in his first varsity appearance as Prairie whipped its second ranked club in three days. The Hawks trimmed No. 3 Jefferson in the opening round, clobbered Washington in the semifinals and tamed Kennedy in the championship round, allowing just two runs in three games.

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Prairie has not enjoyed a lot of success in baseball over the years, but the Hawks are off to a promising start this season.



"We've got a hungry group of seniors in the program and we returned a lot of those guys from last year," said all-star shortstop Cal Clark, who went 3-for-4 with three RBIs and another sparkling play in the field.

"Any time you get a chance to win a championship and be able to accomplish that goal, it's a very good feeling," he said. "We're going to leave the ballpark tonight very happy, but this is not our end goal and we still have work to do moving forward."

Kilpatrick struck out eight batters while tossing a complete game. He walked one man, hit two batters and needed only 88 pitches in the seven-inning contest.

"They're a talented team," Kilpatrick said of the Cougars. "It's good to get a shutout, but it feels great to get it in the championship game. It's a nice first outing for me."

Kennedy had runners at second and third with two outs in the fourth inning of a scoreless game when Anthony Alepra ripped a shot down the first-base line, but Prairie first baseman Mitch Nierling darted in front of the ball and flipped to Kilpatrick to end the inning.

The Hawks have an air-tight infield with Cooper Reittinger at third base, Clark at shortstop, Ethan Copeland at second base and Nierling at first base, one of the strengths of the team.

"It's pretty easy pitching behind such a great defense and it's fun to be out there," said

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Kilpatrick. "One of the best in the state, no doubt."

Rima was anxious to see how Kilpatrick would perform in his varsity debut and was impressed. So was Clark from his perch at shortstop.

"He was incredible tonight," said Clark. "I was really impressed with his composure out there. He got in a jam a couple of times and was able to work his way out of it. A lot of the credit goes to him for throwing strikes and for the defense we had behind him making plays."

Kennedy junior Chandler Poell matched Kilpatrick through the first four innings of the scoreless game as the Cougars also played well on defense, especially with catcher Matt Berst gunning down runners, but Poell appeared to tire a bit in the fifth inning when the Hawks scored three runs.

Poell walked two batters and Prairie's first run scored on a wild pitch. Clark delivered a two-run single for a 3-0 lead, chasing Poell from the game after a strong outing.

Prairie added two insurance runs in the seventh inning, with Clark collecting another RBI single to finish a strong Metro Tournament for the Hawks.

"We're three games in," said Rima. "We've got a long ways to go, but it's a good start."

Washington smacked Mount Vernon, 19-9, for third place. Jefferson dumped Marion, 13-1, for fifth place. Linn-Mar defeated Xavier, 15-7, for seventh place.

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