

Jahlas, Cougars finish state tourney in tears

Written by Jim Ecker

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DES MOINES - Josh Jahlas broke a pair of school records this year and set the tone for the Kennedy baseball team all season with his diving catches in center field and aggressive baserunning that sparked the Cougars to victory after victory en route to the state tournament.

Unfortunately for Jahlas and the Cougars, the final play of his high school career will haunt him for a long, long time to come. As it turned out, he was aggressive once too often at the worst possible time.

Jahlas tried to take an extra base with two outs in the seventh inning and was thrown out at third by a healthy margin as Kennedy lost to Fort Dodge, 4-2, in the semifinals of the Class 4A state tournament at Principal Park Friday night.

It was the second straight year that Fort Dodge eliminated Kennedy from the state tournament and now the Dodgers will face Ankeny for the title Saturday night.

The Cougars trailed 4-0 entering the top of the seventh but rallied and loaded the bases with two outs. Cody Bell lined a two-run single to left field, but Jahlas tried to go from first base to third base when the throw from the left fielder went all the way to the plate.

Third base was uncovered for a moment, but the Fort Dodge third baseman scrambled back to the bag and got the ball from his catcher in time to nab Jahlas.

Jahlas knew he made a mistake, albeit an aggressive mistake, and stayed on his hands and knees in the dirt for several seconds as the Dodgers ran off the field and celebrated their victory. The Cougars, meanwhile, stared in disbelief at the sudden ending.

Jahlas, distraught, was still crying 30 minutes after the game.

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"It seemed like every other time ...," he began, tears streaming down his face. "I mean, you see the overthrow of the third baseman and you just go. I didn't get there fast enough, I guess.

"I don't know," he continued, blaming himself. "Words can't explain it right now. I'm just happy for my team, we made it this far. I don't know. I can't say anything."

Logan Ambrosy, a clutch .400 hitter, would have been the next batter for Kennedy with the tying runs on base. Instead, the game was dramatically over.

Jahlas tormented Linn-Mar in the quarterfinals of the state tournament with his aggressive baserunning, just like he tormented opponents all season while setting school records for most runs and most hits in a single campaign. This time, he didn't make it.

"You tell him that everybody loves him. Unfortunately, it happened," Kennedy Coach Bret Hoyer remarked. "I'm just grateful for all that he's contributed to the baseball program."

Hoyer stared in disbelief after Jahlas was tagged out.

"I was just waving the runner home, and I looked up and Josh was coming. Doggone it," Hoyer said. "He was trying to be aggressive and get the tying run to second base."

Jahlas didn't cost Kennedy the game, of course. The Cougars (33-7) made a string of mistakes during the ballgame and squandered several opportunities.

Ambrosy dropped a fly ball in right field, Jared Staton was called out for leaving a base too soon, Chico Lizarraga let a pitch in the dirt skip between his legs for a wild pitch and a run - something that rarely happened all year. And then there was Kennedy's bunt defense, or lack thereof.

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Fort Dodge (36-7) scored all four of its runs in the fourth inning against Adam Lloyd, and the heart of its rally consisted of two sacrifice bunts that the Cougars could not turn into outs. The first bunt went for a single when the Cougars did not cover first base in time, and the second bunt loaded the bases when Lloyd tried for a force play at third base and didn't get his man.

"They were getting the bunts down and we couldn't stop it," said Lloyd, who is a good-fielding pitcher. "We had a tough time making a play on them.

"They hit a couple of balls hard, but for the most part they were just blooming them in there. It happens sometimes. There's nothing you can do about it."

Fort Dodge defeated Kennedy in a manner that was familiar to all Kennedy fans. Ironically, the Dodgers beat the Cougars by playing baseball "The Kennedy Way" with good pitching, tight defense, excellent bunts and timely hitting. Meanwhile, the Cougars played a very un-Kennedy-like ballgame.

Fort Dodge used its two best pitchers to defeat Dowling in the opening round in a suspended game that began Wednesday night and ended Thursday morning, so the Dodgers gave the ball to sophomore J.C. Hatcher and told him to hold the Cougars in check for as long as he could.

Hatcher (6-0) got the first out in the top of the seventh on a fly ball, but then he walked two straight batters and Fort Dodge Coach Matt Elsbecker made a pitching change. He brought in Luke VanderMaten from shortstop and put Hatcher at shortstop with the game hanging in the balance.

VanderMaten struck out Andrew Johnson for the second out, but then Jahlas hit a chopper to the left of the third baseman for an infield single to load the bases.

Bell came to the plate as the tying run and ripped a 1-0 fastball into left field to make it 4-2, giving the Cougars new life and new hope. And just as quickly, Jahlas was nabbed at third base and the game was over.

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Hatcher, chomping gum all game, scattered five hits in 6 1/3 innings and left runners in scoring position in each of the first four innings as the Cougars couldn't buy a clutch hit. Hatcher went through a lot of gum during the ballgame.

"I go through probably too many," he said. "It's something I do to keep my nerves down. A lot."

The sophomore came through in the clutch for the Dodgers.

"The coaches believe in me, the players believe in me and I have to believe in myself, and that's what I did," he said. "I went out there and got it done."

Fort Dodge will be the underdog in the state finals against top-ranked Ankeny, which has won 27 straight games and has an imposing record of 42-2. Ankeny and Kennedy were ranked 1-2 heading into the state tournament, but now the fourth-ranked Dodgers will try to spoil the party for the Hawks.

"We have our work cut out for us. Let's not kid ourselves," Elsbecker said. "They're the giant. I guess that makes us who? David and Goliath? So we're David. All right. We'll see what happens."

Kennedy made its 14th trip to the state tournament, including 10 times in 20 years with Hoyer. Kennedy won the state title in 2010, reached the quarterfinals in 2011 and made the semifinals in 2012.

"First of all, I'm incredibly proud of these guys," Hoyer said. "These seniors, we've had a hell of a run with them. Their efforts on a day-to-day basis have been phenomenal."

"I'm terribly grateful for the opportunity to coach these kind of men. It's been a lot of fun, it's

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been a great ride. I'm very proud of them."

Nick Appleget pitched 2 2/3 innings of shutout ball in relief for Kennedy, not allowing the ball to leave the infield.

Boxscore

KENNEDY (2)

Josh Jahlas, cf, 3 0 2 0, Cody Bell, 1b, 4 0 2 2, Logan Ambrosy, rf, 3 0 0 0, Devon Jacobus, 3b, 3 0 1 0, Jared Staton, pr, 0 0 0 0, Alex Hayden, 2b, 2 0 1 0, Jimmy Lizarraga, c, 3 0 0 0, Adam Lloyd, p, 1 0 0 0, Nick Appleget, p, 1 0 0 0, Ben Sass, cr, 0 1 0 0, Derek Jacobus, ss, 2 1 0 0, Andrew Johnson, lf, 1 0 0 0. Totals 23 2 7 2.

FORT DODGE (4)

Will Gormally, cf, 3 0 0 0, Luke VanderMaten, ss-p, 4 0 2 1, Sam Edwards, 1b, 3 0 1 0, Tommy Halligan, 3b, 3 0 2 0, Isaac Lehman, lf, 2 0 0 0, Tyler Vaughn, dh, 3 1 1 0, Devon Harms, c, 3 1 1 0, J.C. Hatcher, p-ss, 3 0 0 0, Cole Jarrad, cr, 0 1 0 0, Austin Halligan, rf, 3 1 1 2, Nathan Matthes, 2b, 0 0 0 0. Totals 27 4 8 3.

Kennedy 000 000 2 -- 2 7 1
Fort Dodge 000 400 x -- 4 8 0

Lloyd, Appleget (4) and Lizarraga. Hatcher, VanderMaten (7) and Harms. W - Hatcher (6-0). L - Lloyd (9-2). Sv - VanderMaten (2). 2B - Hayden, Edwards.