

Lions seek 1st win at state tourney

Written by Jim Ecker

Tuesday, 30 July 2013 15:13 -

The Linn-Mar Lions have reached the state baseball tournament in back-to-back years for the first time in school history.

Now they feel it's time for the next step.

"The next step is to go down and win a game at state," said Coach Chad Lechner. "We're going to have to play the same way we have been."

The Lions played in the state tournament in 1987, 1995, 2006 and 2012, but they lost in the first round each time for an 0-and-4 record.

Linn-Mar (27-15) hopes to take the next step against seventh-ranked Johnston (26-12) in the quarterfinals of the Class 4A state tournament Wednesday at noon at Principal Park in Des Moines.

The Lions fell to Kennedy in the opening round last year. They lost a few key players from that club and two top assistant coaches left to become head coaches on their own, so Lechner had to remodel things a little bit this year.

"It's a first for me, going back-to-back (to state). It's pretty rewarding," he said. "It was certainly a tough road to do it."

Linn-Mar upset No.3 Iowa City West in the substate finals to make the state tournament. Now the Lions will face another ranked club in Des Moines when they battle Johnston.

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Linn-Mar features two all-star pitchers in Austin Stroschein (8-1, 1.63 ERA) and Justin Wyant (6-2, 1.50 ERA). It takes strong pitching to win at the state tournament, and the Lions boast two of the best hurlers in the Mississippi Valley Conference.

"They've been fantastic all season," said Lechner. "I feel they've gotten stronger in the second half of the season. They're pitching with a lot of confidence.

"I think our team plays with a lot of confidence when they're on the mound. We seem to play our best defense and have really good at-bats. The kids seem to focus a little bit more. They know those two guys are going to keep us in the game.

"I think that's the feeling everyone has with them on the mound," said Lechner. "We certainly play well behind them."

Wyant has been nearly unhittable in his last three starts for the Lions. He tossed consecutive no-hitters against Waterloo West and Kennedy, then followed that with a three-hit shutout of Kennedy again.

Johnston also features two strong pitchers with Joe Hawks (6-1, 1.95 ERA) and Alex McCune (5-2, 1.02 ERA).

The Dragons are hitting .341 as a team this season, but the Lions are not far behind with a .323 batting average. Linn-Mar sophomore Brandt Ollinger led the Mississippi Valley Conference in hitting this year with a .463 mark and is supported by Jimmy Roth (.419), Stroschein (.365), Mitch Stickney (.343) and Austin Banks (.342).

Johnston's top hitters are Connor Jacobson (.374), Nick Stitzell (.361), Travis Brenner (.360), Trevor McCauley (.351), Michael Kinning (.351) and McCune (.347).

Linn-Mar and Johnston play the initial game in the Class 4A tournament on Wednesday. Des

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Moines East (36-4) faces Davenport North (23-15) at 2 p.m., Xavier (25-15) meets Sioux City East at 6 p.m., and Ankeny (34-7) plays Clinton (25-14) at 8 p.m.

Ankeny, the defending champion, is ranked No.1 in the state. Des Moines East is ranked No.3, making them the favorites to play for the title Saturday at 8 p.m.

The semifinals are Friday at 6 p.m. and 8 p.m.

Kyle Rodenkirk left Linn-Mar after the 2012 campaign to become the head coach at Jefferson and Brent Henry left to become the head coach at Clear Creek Amana. John Heald and former Linn-Mar head coach Phil Katz joined the staff this season, joining Rob Sturenfeldt as assistant coaches.

Lechner worked for Katz at Linn-Mar earlier in his career and now the roles are reversed.