

No.7 Johnston walks by Lions, 2-0

Written by Jim Ecker

Wednesday, 31 July 2013 14:44 -

DES MOINES - Something happens to Linn-Mar pitchers when they get to the Class 4A state baseball tournament at spacious Principal Park in Des Moines.

They have trouble throwing strikes.

It happened to Linn-Mar senior Justin Wyant Wednesday against No.7 Johnston, just like it happened to the Lions last year in the first round of the state tournament against Kennedy.

Wyant walked eight batters in four-plus innings Wednesday and uncorked a wild pitch as Linn-Mar lost to Johnston, 2-0, in the opening round on a warm, sunny day in Des Moines.

Wyant and relief pitcher Austin Stroschein allowed only one hit, but Johnston pitcher Joe Hawks tossed a three-hit shutout and tamed the Lions with a crackling 90 mph fastball and sharp curveball.

"I think a little nerves got to me a bit," said Wyant, who normally has good control. "I definitely had trouble throwing strikes. I couldn't find the zone, I guess."

Linn-Mar (27-16) has made five trips to the state tournament in school history and is 0-for-5, still looking for its first victory on the big stage.

Wyant had been masterful in his previous three starts for the Lions with two no-hitters and a three-hit shutout, but he had trouble finding the plate Wednesday. He threw 84 pitches, but 48 of them were called "balls" by home-plate umpire Mark Harris.

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"I got squeezed a little bit and got a little angry, I guess," said Wyant. "One thing led to another."

Three Linn-Mar pitchers (Jake Stolley, Wyant and Nate Greve) walked 10 batters in a 13-1 loss to Kennedy in the first round of the 2012 state tournament, so that makes 18 walks in 14 innings the last two years in Des Moines.

Linn-Mar Coach Chad Lechner visited the mound in the second inning when Wyant walked four batters and allowed a run to score on a wild pitch, trying to calm the right-hander and give him a chance to collect himself.

"It's a tough situation to be in. The crowd is going crazy. It's exciting," said Lechner, who tried to put the situation in perspective for Wyant by saying, "Well, this is a lot better than playing on a Saturday with 10 people in the stands."

Lechner stayed with Wyant until he walked the leadoff batter in the fifth inning on four pitches. The score was only 1-0 at the time, but Wyant had walked at least one batter in every inning and was not able to find his rhythm.

"It's nice to pitch in front of a big crowd, but when you don't have your best stuff it's kind of disappointing," said Wyant.

Wyant (6-3) did not allow any hits, but those eight walks led to an early departure. "He did a fantastic job battling through it when he didn't have his best stuff," said Lechner. "He gave us an opportunity to win the game."

Stroschein was touched for a run in the sixth inning when Trevor McCauley led off with a double to deep right field, advanced to third on an infield grounder and scored on a passed ball to make it 2-0. The double by McCauley was the only hit the Dragons (27-12) got all day, but it was all they needed.

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Linn-Mar put runners on first and second with nobody out in the second inning on an opposite-field double by Jimmy Roth and a walk by Austin Banks, but nothing good happened after that. Johnston got the first out on a fielder's choice, putting runners at first and third, then Hawks struck out two batters with nasty curveballs.

A run there would have tied the game, 1-1, but the Lions squandered their best opportunity of the day.

"We were one two-out hit away from getting a run across and getting some momentum going and maybe it's a different story," said Lechner. "But you have to credit their pitcher and their defense for making plays. He was too much for us today."

Hawks (7-1) struck out eight batters, walked two and threw a complete game with 103 pitches.

"I felt pretty good out there today," said Hawks, who will pitch next year at Iowa Central Community College. "I thought everything was going well. I was able to hit my spots and focus on every pitch, every time. I wasn't looking ahead or anything."

"I felt good today. I was well-rested and it was fun to pitch today."

Kyle Mortensen led off the bottom of the first inning with a single to right field for Linn-Mar, Roth had his opposite-field double in the second inning and Ben Larson had a double to left field in the fifth inning against Hawks.

Stroschein compared Hawks to Xavier pitcher Mitch Keller, another right-hander with a good fastball and curve.

"He was a little shaky at first, but he found his command after two innings," said Stroschein. "We couldn't pick him up and put a good swing on it."

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"It's baseball," said Stroschein. "It happens."

Linn-Mar played in back-to-back state tournaments for the first time in school history, but has gone home empty both times.

"It's a little disappointing, but what can you do?" said Wyant. "I'm proud of this team. We battled the whole season."

JOHNSTON (2): Schade, cf, 1 0 0 0, Kinning, ss, 3 0 0 0, McCauley, 1b, 2 1 1 0, Jacobsen, dh, 3 0 0 0, Brenner, 2b, 2 1 0 0, McCune, rf, 3 0 0 0, Richman, lf, 0 0 0 0, Hawks, p, 1 0 0 0, Heuss, cr, 0 0 0 0, Stitzell, 3b, 2 0 0 0, Kramer, lf/rf, 1 0 0 0, Woods, c, 0 0 0 0. Totals 18 2 1 0.

LINN-MAR (0): Mortensen, cf, 3 0 1 0, Streller, ss, 2 0 0 0, Stickney, rf, 3 0 0 0, Stroschein, 1b/p, 3 0 0 0, Roth, 2b, 3 0 1 0, Banks, c, 1 0 0 0, Ollinger, 3b, 3 0 0 0, Reimer, dh, 2 0 0 0, Larson, lf, 2 0 1 0, Wyant, p, 0 0 0 0, Kane, 1b, 0 0 0 0. Totals 22 0 3 0.

Johnston 010 001 0 - 2 1 0

Linn-Mar 000 000 0 - 0 3 1

Hawks and Woods. Wyant, Stroschein (5) and Banks. W - Hawks (7-1). L - Wyant (6-3). 2B - McCauley, Roth, Larson. SB - Schade, McCauley, Brenner.