

No. 9 Lions sweep No. 2 J-Hawks

Written by Jim Ecker

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There's something about playing the best baseball teams in the state that brings out the best in the Linn-Mar Lions.

The Lions made a statement earlier in the season by sweeping a Mississippi Valley Conference doubleheader from Kennedy when the Cougars were ranked No. 1 in the state in Class 4A.

The giant-killers from Linn-Mar struck again Monday night when they swept an MVC twinbill from No. 2 Jefferson, 3-1 and 3-1, at the Oak Ridge Middle School complex in Marion.

The victories lifted the Lions into serious contention for the Valley Division title and improved their chances of claiming a precious No. 1 seed for the substate tournament in a few weeks.

"We played probably our best ball of the season," Linn-Mar coach Chad Lechner said. "We needed to, to be able to beat a team as good as Jefferson is. We played well, and we need to do that on our own field against good opponents.

"I'm proud of our kids, how hard they competed tonight," he said. "We played clean on defense and made plays we're capable of and maybe a couple of 'plus' plays here and there."

Jefferson jumped from No. 4 to No. 2 in the Class 4A rankings earlier Monday, but that put an even bigger target on their backs. The J-Hawks had a

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three-game lead over Linn-Mar, Kennedy and Iowa City West in the Valley Division standings when the day began, but not any more.

Jefferson is now 12-4 in the Valley Division of the MVC and Linn-Mar is 10-4, with both clubs dead-even in the loss column. The J-Hawks are 19-6 overall and the Lions are 16-6.

All of the Linn-Mar players were aware of the conference standings heading into the doubleheader.

"We have have it posted in our locker room," said Sam Crawford. "That's our goal all season, to win conference. We have good pitching, good hitting, good defense. When we put everything together it goes well."



The Lions parlayed their pitching, hitting and defense into a pair of impressive victories over Jefferson. The J-Hawks are normally a good-hitting club, but they managed only two runs on 10 hits all night.

Manny Jeffery tossed a complete game for Linn-Mar in the opener. He allowed one run on six hits, with two strikeouts and one walk. Spencer VanScoyoc pitched four good innings for Jefferson and allowed only one run, but was the hard-luck loser.

Crawford pitched 5 1/3 strong innings for Linn-Mar in the nightcap before giving the ball to Jake

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Brandt. Crawford moved to shortstop when Brandt came in to pitch in the sixth and helped the Lions escape a bases-loaded jam when he raced far to his left for a grounder up the middle and made a nifty flip to second base for the third out.

Brandt struck out Tyler Roeder, VanScoyoc and Lucas Larson in the top of the seventh to end the game, mowing down the heart of the Jefferson lineup and three good hitters. "It was a lot of fun, to get the adrenaline pumping," said Brandt, "to go out there and pump strikes."

Linn-Mar catcher Brandt Ollinger called for a steady diet of fastballs and Jake Brandt delivered. Now the Lions are in the thick of the conference race and battling for a No. 1 seed for substate.

"I'm excited as heck," said Ollinger, who returned to full-time duties with the Lions this season after playing travel ball for a Chicago-based team last summer. "We were preparing for these games. We knew it would be a big one. We knew we needed a sweep and we got it done."

Ollinger said he's committed to playing at Johnson County Community College next year.

Adam Stolley and Jeffery had two hits for Linn-Mar in the opener. Jeffery, Adam Bradley and Taylor Yoke had RBIs. Jared Eivins and Larson had two hits for Jefferson. Larson had a double and triple.

Bradley had two hits for Linn-Mar in the nightcap. Ryan Wyant had two RBIs. Stolley also had an RBI.

Linn-Mar hosts No. 5 Cedar Rapids Prairie on Wednesday night in another key doubleheader. The Lions will finish the week with a twinbill Friday at Dubuque Hempstead.

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"This week tells us a lot about a lot of things," said Lechner. "If we're going to do anything as far as seeding goes we're going to have to earn it. That's the way it should be."

GAME 1

Jefferson 000 001 0 - 1

Linn-Mar 001 020 x - 3

W - Jeffery. L - S. VanScoyoc.

GAME 2

Jefferson 000 001 0 - 1

Linn-Mar 021 000 x - 3

W - Crawford. L - Konigsmark. S - Brandt.