

## **Linn-Mar gives its old field a special farewell**

Written by Jim Ecker

Wednesday, 18 July 2012 23:38 - Last Updated Wednesday, 18 July 2012 23:39

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They're going to rip apart the baseball field at Linn-Mar High School later this summer and put a \$5 million swimming pool in its place, but all that water won't be able to drown the happy memories from the final game at the old park Wednesday night.

The ninth-ranked Lions capitalized on a life-haunting error by the Muscatine second baseman with two outs in the bottom of the seventh and escaped the Muskies, 2-1, in eight dramatic innings in the Class 4A substate finals.

If Muscatine second baseman Tyler Kovach had made an accurate throw to first base on a simple groundball by Kevin Bogert in the bottom of the seventh, the Lions would have suffered a 1-0 loss at the hands of Muscatine ace Derek Burkamper and turned in their uniforms.

Instead, Linn-Mar (29-11) advanced to the Class 4A state tournament and will face No. 2 Kennedy (32-6) in an all-Metro battle in the opening round on Wednesday at 6 p.m. at Principal Park in Des Moines.

"It's nice to close out the field with a win," said Linn-Mar Coach Chad Lechner after having a bucket of water dumped on his head by his happy players. "I had an e-mail from Coach (Phil) Katz today. He wished us luck and told us to close out the field in style. I told him we'll give it our best shot."

Lechner used to work for Katz and succeeded him as Linn-Mar's head coach. Now the Lions are returning to the state tournament for the first time since 2006.

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"We're super excited right now," said Linn-Mar junior Nate Greve, who excelled in relief Wednesday. "We were gunning for this game."

Linn-Mar trailed, 1-0, heading into the bottom of the seventh inning against Burkamper, a junior flamethrower who has committed to Nebraska, but Austin Banks got the Lions started with a leadoff single to left. That got the overflow crowd and the home team excited.

Keaton Blackford put down a perfect bunt and got Banks to second base with one out, and at that point Lechner used Travis Kvach as a courtesy runner for Banks. Greve hit a little chopper in front of the plate and was thrown out at first as Kvach took third base, but now there were two outs and only a glimmer of hope.

The Linn-Mar fans groaned when Bogert hit a roller to the second baseman, but Kovach appeared to squeeze the life out of the ball before tossing it low and wide of his first baseman for a two-base error. Kvach scored the tying run and the Lions had new life.

Lechner insisted he was not ready to concede when Bogert hit that groundball, even though it didn't look good at first.

"He hit that and I really was thinking, 'He's fast, we've got a shot, he's got a shot to beat it out,' " Lechner said. "And that puts pressure on the defense. He (the

second baseman) had to hurry and fortunately that one went our way."

Michael Redmond struck out to end the bottom of the seventh inning, sending the game into extra frames as the crowd buzzed with excitement and anticipation.

Now it came down to a matchup of Greve against Burkamper, and the advantage shifted to the Lions. Burkamper had already thrown 96 pitches through seven innings on a hot night, on top of throwing 132 pitches last Friday and another 2 2/3 innings on Monday. Meanwhile, Greve did

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not begin pitching until the fifth inning when he relieved Nate Stolley with Muscatine holding a 1-0 lead.

Greve, a hard-throwing lefty, struck out the first batter in the top of the eighth and walked a man, but collected two more strikeouts to end the inning. That gave Greve eight K's in just four innings on the mound.

Linn-Mar came to bat in the bottom of the eighth against Burkamper and everything went wrong for the Muskies. Burkamper walked Mitch Stickney on a 3-1 count and then disaster struck for the visiting club.

Austin Stroschein put down a perfect bunt that should have been a simple sacrifice, but Burkamper bobbled the ball and tossed it over the first baseman's head for an error to put runners on first and third with nobody out. Muscatine gave Jimmy Roth an intentional walk, loading the bases with nobody out.

Stolley was the next batter and Muscatine brought the infield in, looking for a play at the plate, but suddenly it was over. Burkamper, perhaps trying to throw too hard, uncorked a wild pitch that bounced in front of the plate and hopped all the way to the screen as Stickney raced home with the winning run.

Within seconds, Stickney was buried at the bottom of a dogpile at home plate.

"I got about 10 feet away from home plate and I could see the pitcher wasn't covering," Stickney said after his teammates let him up for air. "I was pretty excited."

Stickney scored the final run in the final game that will be played on the old field, putting his name in the history books.

"That was just a great high school game," Lechner said. "I haven't seen one that good in a long

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time."

Grant McConnaha gave Muscatine (26-12) a 1-0 lead with a home run against Stolley in the second inning, and it stayed that way until the fateful seventh when the Lions scraped themselves off the bottom of the barrel and kept their season alive.

Muscatine got three hits against Stolley, but Greve did not allow any hits during his brilliant four-inning stint in relief. "I had the adrenaline going," said Greve, who was popping the catcher's glove. "Fastballs. Let them hit it."

They didn't.

"Fantastic. Just fantastic," said Lechner, saluting Greve for an outstanding performance.

Stolley escaped a bases-loaded, no-out jam in the fourth inning with two strikeouts and a ground ball, an empty frame that cost Muscatine dearly.

"Everybody looked at that ground ball," said Muscatine Coach Bob Leech, referring to the two-out error in the seventh, "but we had the bases loaded and nobody out. You've got to score. You've got to score. You've got to put the ball in play.

"That's when we could have broken it open," he said. "Sure, that last play everybody thinks about, but there were places in the game early on where we could have broken it open and given ourselves a little cushion."

Stolley and Greve pitched four innings apiece, which seemed appropriate. "We have a great staff," Lechner said. "They're 1A and 1B."

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Burkamper was the hard-luck loser. He finished with 104 pitches on short rest.

"He's fantastic," Lechner remarked. "He battles and battles and commands the strike zone and changes speeds. He's the best we've seen all season. He's a special pitcher.

"I thought he might tire a little quicker than he did, but give him credit. I hope they're not in our substate next year."

Kovach, the second baseman who made the critical error, sat in misery on the Muscatine bench a good 20 minutes after the game, an assistant coach trying to console him. Burkamper stood a few feet away, dealing with a tough, tough defeat.

"It was a team effort. We win as a team and we lose as a team," Burkamper said. "That's the way it worked out."

Burkamper said his arm felt fine all night. "It felt awesome," he said. "It's probably as good as my arm has ever felt in my life."

Linn-Mar and Kennedy shared the Mississippi Division title in the Mississippi Valley Conference this season with identical 22-4 league records and split their doubleheader at Kennedy. Now they'll travel to Des Moines for the decisive rubber match.

"Yeah, why drive all the way over there?," said Lechner, who jokingly invited the Cougars to play the Lions on their new field at Oak Ridge Middle School that will be ready next season, part of a \$2 million project that will feature two regulation baseball fields and two softball fields at one location.

Iowa City West (34-8) will face West Des Moines Valley (33-9) in the first round of the Class 4A state tournament at noon on Wednesday, followed by No. 1 seed Ankeny (40-2) against Davenport North (18-21) at approximately 2 p.m.

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Linn-Mar (the No. 7 seed) will play Kennedy (the No. 2 seed) at 6 p.m., followed by Fort Dodge (34-7) against West Des Moines Dowling Catholic (32-10).

"We'll have to play our best game," Lechner said. "They're one of the best teams in the state. We feel like when we play well we've got a shot against anybody. When you get there, you're going to have to face good competition. It just happens that it's another conference opponent."

It was a long, hot, tough day for Muscatine from start to finish. The Muskies got stuck in traffic on I-380 on their way to the game and crept along at 20 mph for about 30 minutes due to a traffic accident, all the while sitting on a school bus with no air conditioning due to a broken system.

The Muskies didn't arrive at the field until 6:20 p.m. for the 7 p.m. contest, and the game started 10 minutes late to give the visitors an opportunity to properly prepare.

### MUSCATINE (1)

Moss, cf, 4 0 0 0, Calvert, ss, 3 0 0 0, Freilinger, 1b, 4 0 1 0, Jones, dh, 3 0 0 0, Burkamper, p, 0 0 0 0, Herman, c, 2 0 0 0, Wieskamp, cr, 0 0 0 0, Wagner, 3b, 2 0 0 0, McConnaha, lf, 4 1 2 1, Simonsen, rf, 3 0 0 0, Kovach, 2b, 3 0 0 0. Totals 28 1 3 1.

### LINN-MAR (2)

Greve, lf/p, 4 0 0 0, Bogert, cf/rf, 3 0 1 0, Redmond, 2b/cf, 4 0 0 0, Stickney, rf/lf, 2 1 0 0, Stroschein, 3b, 3 0 1 0, Roth, 1b/2b, 3 0 0 0, Stolley, p/1b, 3 0 1 0, Mortensen, cr, 0 0 0 0, Banks, c, 2 0 2 0, Kvach, cr, 0 1 0 0, Blackford, dh, 1 0 0 0, Strellner, ss, 0 0 0 0. Totals 25 2 5 0.

Muscatine 010 000 00 - 1 3 4

Linn-Mar 000 000 11 - 2 5 2

(No outs when winning run scored)

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Burkamper and Herman; Stolley, Greve (5) and Banks. W - Greve (7-3). L - Burkamper (8-5).  
HR - McConnaha. SB - Bogert.