

## Linn-Mar thrives with 3 head coaches

Written by Jim Ecker

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This has been a magical season for the Linn-Mar baseball team and Coach Chad Lechner with a school record for victories, a Mississippi Valley Conference title and now a trip to the Class 4A state tournament next week.

It's also been a magical season for Linn-Mar's two other "head" coaches who have helped guide the Lions this year.

Lechner quickly credits Kyle Rodenkirk and Brent Henry for the pivotal roles they've played as assistant coaches with the Lions. A year ago, Rodenkirk was the young head coach at Anamosa and Henry was the interim head coach at Cedar Rapids Washington.

They've joined forces with Rob Sturenfeldt, the fourth member of the varsity staff, to help produce one of the best seasons in school history.

They all have specific assignments and have successfully blended their particular fields of expertise. Rodenkirk, a catcher at Cedar Rapids Jefferson and Winona State, works with the pitchers and catchers. Henry, who played at Cornell College, works with the hitters and outfielders.

"It's really kind of nice, because it's almost like we have three head coaches," Rodenkirk said Thursday. "Chad has the overall say, obviously, but he really takes our input on a lot of things, which is awesome."

Rodenkirk, 28, endured a pair of tough seasons at Anamosa, going 6-31 in 2010 and 6-34 in 2011, according to the IHSAA website, so he's enjoyed the ride this year and is looking forward to the state tournament in Des Moines. "I think I'm as pumped as the players are, that's for sure," he said.

Henry, 32, became Washington's interim head coach at the beginning of the 2011 season when Bryon Schlotterback took an unexpected leave of absence and then resigned. Henry

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calmed the waters and led the Warriors to a 16-22 record, which was an improvement over the previous campaign.

He applied to be Washington's head coach this season, but Washington football coach Tony Lombardi was given the assignment. Henry, who teaches business classes at Linn-Mar, joined the Lions as an assistant coach instead.

Henry enjoyed calling the shots at Washington last year and would like to become a head coach again some day. "I thought we had a pretty successful year," he said. "We had some growth and we had some success.

"I had a lot of fun with it," he said. "Someday I'd like to get back in that capacity."

Rodenkirk would like to become a head coach again as well and said he benefitted from his two years at Anamosa, despite the lack of success.

"It was pretty gruesome," he said. "I think we lost 15 one-run games that first year. It was a huge turnaround for them, because they hadn't been in that many games. So coming into the second season, my main goal was to win those one-run games. It didn't quite happen.

"I give those kids credit, they'd do anything for you, but they didn't have quite the talent as a lot of those teams have in the Wamac.

"It definitely made me a better coach," he said. "Believe me, I've seen everything in those two years. It's good to get adversity like that. I've been on both ends of the spectrum now. It definitely matures you as a coach."

Rodenkirk teaches science at Wilson Middle School and was commuting from Cedar Rapids to Anamosa for his baseball duties, including indoor pitcher and catcher workouts in the winter when he'd get up at 4:30 a.m. for the trip to Anamosa and the pre-school drills.

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Rodenkirk was playing golf last fall with major leaguer Ryan Sweeney, his brother-in-law, when they began talking about Rodenkirk's future as a coach. Sweeney is friends with Tim Strellner, whose son plays for Linn-Mar, and Rodenkirk learned the Lions were looking for an assistant coach.

"I wanted to get closer to town here and I figured it would be a great fit," Rodenkirk said. "I knew they had some talent to work with, which was what I was looking for. And it's been a great fit ever since."

Rodenkirk was coaching first base Wednesday night when Linn-Mar played Muscatine in the substate finals at Linn-Mar. The Lions were down to their final out, trailing 1-0 in the bottom of the seventh with Kevin Bogert at the plate, when Rodenkirk appealed for heavenly assistance from Ken Charipar, his grandfather who passed away last year.

Rodenkirk used to spend hours talking baseball with Charipar after many of those losses at Anamosa and figured he'd be listening again Wednesday.

"I haven't told too many people this besides my family," Rodenkirk related. "We were down one-nothing, two outs, we had a runner at third. I walked up and I talked to Bogert, and I'm walking back to the first-base coaching box and I looked up at the sky and I said, 'Come on, Grandpa. I'm this close to the state tournament, I've never been there as a player or a coach.'"

"I said, 'Just give me one taste. That's all I want is one taste.' Sure enough, the next pitch is hit to the second baseman, he throws it away and I thought, 'You've got to be kidding.' So I'm sure he was looking down and grinning, that's for sure."

Linn-Mar beat Muscatine, 2-1, in eight innings to make the state tournament, where it will face Kennedy in the quarterfinals on Wednesday.

Lechner coaches third base and Rodenkirk takes care of the duties at first base. Henry

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normally stays near the on-deck circle, giving advice to hitters before they bat. He enjoys his role with the club and credits Lechner for giving the assistant coaches a significant job to perform.

"Lechner has done a great job of giving us a lot of autonomy within our respective roles," he said. "He's given us a lot of freedom and entrusted us in our roles. That's great that he trusts us."

That trust has helped the ninth-ranked Lions win a school-record 29 games, tie Kennedy for the Mississippi Division title in the MVC and earn a trip to Des Moines.

"Right now I'm having a lot of fun with this staff and this group of guys," Henry said. "It's fun coaching guys like this. It's been a very unique and fun season."