

Cougars, Lions feature premier pitchers

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Kennedy Cougars and Linn-Mar Lions have two of the deepest pitching staffs in the state, a talent pool that would lend itself to an intriguing five-game series to determine the Metro champion or perhaps even the state champ.

Imagine that. A five-game series between the Cougars and Lions, on five straight days, with the first two games at second-ranked Kennedy, the next two games at ninth-ranked Linn-Mar and perhaps the fifth and final game (if necessary) at Veterans Memorial Stadium.

It will never happen, of course. The IHSAA state tournament is a single-elimination event, beginning with the quarterfinals Wednesday when Kennedy and Linn-Mar collide at Principal Park in Des Moines at 6 p.m.

Both clubs are fully rested and fully armed. Kennedy is expected to send right-hander Alex Hayden (10-2, 1.06 ERA) to the mound against Linn-Mar southpaw Jake Stolley (7-1, 1.11 ERA) in a showdown of star hurlers.

Hayden and Stolley are both capable of tossing complete games, and if their earned run averages hold true to form -- slightly more than one earned run per man per game -- it might be tied 1-1 after seven innings and head to extra innings.

It might be fitting if they battle into overtime, because the Cougars and Lions were pretty much dead-even during the regular season. They both finished 22-4 in the Mississippi Division of the MVC and split their conference doubleheader.

Kennedy drubbed Linn-Mar, 12-2, in the semifinals of the Metro tournament in late May for a 2-1 series edge, but now they'll meet in the biggest game of the season for either team. The winner advances to the state semifinals Friday night. The loser goes home.

Hayden did not pitch against Linn-Mar this season, which is not surprising. Kennedy Coach Bret Hoyer doesn't like to give opponents a look at someone they might face in a key

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postseason game. Likewise, Stolley did not pitch against the Cougars this year.

Hayden is a fastball pitcher who is especially tough when he throws his curveball for strikes. Stolley has a nasty curveball and is especially tough when he spots his fastball for strikes. If both men are in top form, it could be a classic.

Hayden leads all of the pitchers in the Class 4A tournament with 10 victories; Stolley ranks second in strikeouts with 84 in 56 2/3 innings.

Both teams might need only one pitcher Wednesday, but they both have incredibly deep staffs that would truly lend itself to a five-game series.

Kennedy boasts Adam Lloyd (9-1, 2.43 ERA), Nick Appleget (8-0, 1.89 ERA) and Cody Bell (2-1, 3.99 ERA) in its four-man rotation with Hayden.

Linn-Mar counters with Nate Greve (7-3, 1.34 ERA), Justin Wyant (6-1, 2.38 ERA) and Austin Stroschein (5-0, 4.71 ERA) in its top quartet with Stolley.

Imagine those pitching matchups in a five-game series.

The Cougars have allowed a tournament-low 81 walks and 207 hits in 38 games. Linn-Mar pitchers boast a tournament-high 334 strikeouts in 40 games.

Kennedy got some effective work out of the bullpen this year from Zach Johnson (1-1, 4.04 ERA), and Linn-Mar received key innings from Keaton Blackford (2-3, 2.83 ERA).

The pitching staffs might be dead-even, but the Cougars deserve a slight nod in the hitting department with Bell (.460) and Josh Jahlas (.456) ranked 1-2 in the 4A field in batting. Jahlas

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leads everyone in the tournament with 62 hits and 54 runs.

Kennedy also features Logan Ambrosy (.397), Hayden (.385), Derek Jacobus (.371), Chico Lizarraga (.330) and Devon Jacobus (.305), although Devon Jacobus has struggled this season with a bad back after making all-state in 2011.

Linn-Mar counters with a batting order that features Greve (.383), Michael Redmond (.366), Stroschein (.351), Mitch Stickney (.328), Stolley (.327) and Jimmy Roth (.296).

Kennedy likes to work the pitch count and draw its share of walks, whereas Linn-Mar might come out swinging. The Cougars are fond of "small ball" at times and Hoyer loves the squeeze bunt, perhaps moreso than the Lions.

The Cougars are seeded No. 2 in the tournament and the Lions are seeded No. 7, so on paper the Cougars are favored to win. But they won't play on paper, of course.

Kennedy has a big edge in tournament experience. The Cougars won the Class 4A state title in 2010 and are making their third straight trip to Des Moines, whereas the Lions have not played in the state tournament since 2006.

The winner of Wednesday night's game will face Fort Dodge (34-7) or Dowling Catholic (32-10) in the semifinals Friday at 8 p.m.

Ankeny (40-2) plays Davenport North (18-21) and Iowa City West (34-8) faces West Des Moines Dowling (33-9) in the quarterfinals Wednesday. Ankeny is ranked No. 1, seeded No. 1 and riding a 25-game winning streak. Dowling is the defending champion.

The championship game is scheduled for Saturday at 8 p.m.