

Big crowd sees J-Hawks nip Prairie

Written by Jim Ecker

Tuesday, 14 July 2015 21:56 - Last Updated Wednesday, 15 July 2015 06:00



An overflow crowd filled every nook-and-cranny at Larry Niemeyer Field on Tuesday night to watch two premier softball teams battle for a spot in the Class 5A state tournament.

When it ended, the fans gave both teams a standing ovation after the third-ranked Jefferson J-Hawks edged the Prairie Hawks, 3-2, to claim a cherished trip to the state tournament next week in Fort Dodge.

Jefferson (35-7) will face Linn-Mar (25-17) in the quarterfinals at 3:30 p.m. Monday.

"Very rarely do I look outside the fence during a game," said Jefferson coach Brian Erbe. "I really, truly don't, believe it or not. But holy cow, I looked around and I just couldn't believe it.

"They were three or four deep in the outfield around the fence. The stands were full. What a great atmosphere. We gave them every bang for their buck."

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The happy Jefferson girls posed for pictures with their regional championship banner and lingered on their field for more than 30 minutes after they earned their third straight trip to Fort Dodge.

The Prairie girls walked slowly to right field, where they held their final post-game meeting with coach Joe Yegge after a spirited battle that fell a tad short.

"They were just a little bit better than us tonight, and hat's off to them," said Yegge. "I'm proud of the girls. We accomplished things this year that the program hasn't done in awhile. We've built a tradition to be proud of.

"You couldn't ask for a better game," he said. "It's a shame that the two of us had to play in the regional finals, but it is what it is. They were better than us tonight and they deserved it."

Prairie won its first division title in the Mississippi Valley Conference in 27 years this season and finished with a 27-12 record. The Hawks might have reached the state tournament if they had been placed in a different regional tournament, but they got paired with the J-Hawks and nearly got it done anyway.

"We all saw it coming, that it was going to be us and Prairie in the regional final," said Jefferson shortstop Avery Guy, who went 3-for-4 with two doubles in the leadoff spot. "We knew it was going to be a tough game."

Jefferson, the visiting team on its own field, jumped to a 3-0 lead after 3 1/2 innings, thanks primarily to a pair of doubles by Guy and a solo

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home run by Hannah Towns, her eighth of the year, but Prairie bounced back.

Prairie scored twice in the bottom of the fourth on two singles, a sacrifice bunt, a sacrifice fly and a double by Anne Cervený to make it 3-2 and the chase was on.

The first time Jefferson senior Alyssa Olson pitched against Prairie sophomore Natalie Halvorson this season, the Prairie Hawks were slightly better and emerged with a 3-1 victory. This time, it went the other way.

Once Prairie pulled within 3-2, Olson stiffened her back and did not let the Hawks score again. "The last three innings that Olson pitched might be the best she's thrown all year," said Erbe. "She's a big-game pitcher and she's not afraid of big-game kids."

Cervený led off the bottom of the seventh for Prairie with a single and reached second base on a sacrifice bunt with two outs. That left the outcome in the hands of Olson on the mound and Kristin Wahlert at the plate.



Nerves jangled on both sides. "Oh my gosh, very nervous," said Guy, the Jefferson shortstop.

Jefferson catcher Maddie Hansen and Erbe visited Olson in the circle with two outs and the tying run in scoring position. Erbe said something to

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lighten the mood, then watched as Olson got Wahlert for the final out on a routine grounder to third baseman Erin Kuba.

Olson leaped into Hansen's arms and the celebration began, but the J-Hawks know this was not the ultimate step in their journey. Jefferson has lost in the first round of the state tournament each of the last two years and the J-Hawks are determined to make amends.

"The next step for us is that first game," said Olson. "We want that first game so bad. We've worked so hard for that first game."

Jefferson split a Mississippi Valley Conference doubleheader with Linn-Mar this season, just as the J-Hawks split their MVC twinbill with Prairie earlier in the year. Now Jefferson and Linn-Mar will meet in the biggest game of the season.

Linn-Mar rolled by Davenport West, 12-2, in the regional finals Tuesday night at Kennedy.

"Now that we've made it to the state tournament, we've got a little monkey to get off our back," said Erbe. "I heard a rumor that it's seven straight trips that we haven't won a first-round game. So that's a little monkey we'd like to shake."

Olson finished with a four-hitter with three strikeouts Tuesday night. Halvorson tossed a five-hitter with seven strikeouts.

Jefferson □ 100 200 0 - 3 5 1

Prairie □ □ □ 000 200 0 - 2 4 1

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W - Olson. L - Halvorson.