

Burkamper helps Muskies foil Prairie

Written by Jim Ecker

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MUSCATINE - The Muscatine Muskies summoned their star pitcher from the bullpen Monday night before the Prairie Hawks could get their ace into the game.

In a seesaw battle, that spelled doom for Prairie.

Muscatine junior Derek Burkamper sparkled in relief as the Muskies rallied for an 8-6 victory over the Hawks in the Class 4A substate semifinals at Tom Bruner Field.

Burkamper, a 6-foot-2 flamethrower who has committed to Nebraska, threw 132 pitches in a 9-2 victory over Jefferson in the substate opener Friday night, but he was armed and ready to go Monday night on just two days rest.

Burkamper entered the game with one out in the bottom of the fifth inning and Prairie holding a 6-4 lead. He retired the side, then became the beneficiary when the Muskies scored four runs in the top of the sixth inning for an 8-6 edge.

Prairie Coach Matt Thede, hoping to save Brennan Hammer so he could pitch against Linn-Mar in the substate finals Wednesday night, waited until the seventh inning to put his ace on the mound and by then it was too late.

"Aw, that loss is on me. That's on me," said Thede, blaming himself for not using Hammer earlier in the contest. "I should have brought him in in the sixth. The game was ours. We had the momentum after that fifth inning."

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Hammer threw 91 pitches on Friday when Prairie topped Ottumwa, 7-1, in the substate opener and he was perfectly willing to pitch in the pivotal sixth inning when the Muskies scored four runs against Prairie relievers Mitch Adams and Connor Steffens.

"Yeah, I could have," Hammer said, "but it's no one's fault. He (Thede) was trying to save me for the final on Wednesday. Hindsight is 20-20."

Burkamper (8-4) pitched 2 2/3 innings Monday night and got the victory. He did not allow any hits and struck out four batters.

"After that game against Cedar Rapids Jefferson, I told Coach (Bob Leech) that I was going to be ready for this game if he needed me," Burkamper remarked.

He came in throwing absolute BB's.

"Oh man, it was probably as hard as I've thrown all year. It was crazy," he said. "I just love going into those tough situations. It's awesome."

Burkamper leads all Class 4A pitchers with 113 strikeouts in 76 1/3 innings and has a flashy earned run average of 1.29. He showed one of the top fastballs in Iowa Monday.

"I think some of them probably touched 91-92 miles per hour," Leech observed.

Leech would have preferred resting Burkamper until the substate finals Wednesday, but felt there was no tomorrow with his club trailing 6-4 in the fifth inning.

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"This is the first time we've ever done anything like this," he said. "He's always had five days or a week or whatever (between appearances).

"If we don't hold them right there, I knew we probably wouldn't be able to catch them. We tried this and we'll worry about Wednesday on Wednesday."

Burkamper wants to be the starting pitcher Wednesday when Muscatine (26-11) faces Linn-Mar (28-11) in the substate finals at the Linn-Mar field, with the winner earning a spot in the Class 4A state tournament.

"I'm sure he probably will be," Leech said. "He's committed to Nebraska. He's not just chopped liver here. He's a pretty good pitcher. When he comes in, we're a pretty confident team. He's a polished pitcher."

Muscatine had the advantage when it was time to put star pitchers in the game. Burkamper was sitting on the bench and able to get ready when needed, whereas Hammer was playing right field and had to be yanked from the game with the Muskies batting in the sixth inning to get loose in the bullpen before re-entering as a pitcher in the seventh.

Linn-Mar Coach Chad Lechner and his staff had ringside seats Monday night in Muscatine and got an eyeful of Burkamper. According to Iowa high school rules, pitchers cannot throw more than nine innings during a 24-hour span, so Burkamper will be able to pitch a complete seven-inning game in the substate finals after throwing 2 2/3 innings Monday.

Linn-Mar plans to counter with Jake Stolley, its ace pitcher who will be fully rested when the Muskies come to town.

Metro baseball fans were looking forward to a substate final Wednesday between Prairie and Linn-Mar that would have featured a classic matchup between Hammer and Stolley. "I was too," said Thede.

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Muscatine took a 4-2 lead in the top of the fourth inning against Prairie starter Bryce Alberts, but the Hawks struck for four runs in the bottom of the fourth for a 6-4 advantage on the strength of four straight doubles by Caleb Davison, Jason Velvick, Ty Mougin and Brayton Carlson.

Adams took over from Alberts in the fifth inning and tossed a scoreless frame, but he got into trouble in the top of the sixth and Thede turned to Steffens. By the time the top of the sixth inning had ended, Muscatine owned an 8-6 lead and Burkamper was firing bullets.

Burkamper pitched a 1-2-3 inning in the seventh with two strikeouts.

Prairie ended the season with a 23-18 record.

"That's a great season for us," Thede remarked. "It's the second-most successful team in Prairie history. But, I really liked our chances in the substate."

The Hawks finished 26-16 last season and reached the substate finals before losing to Mason City. They were hoping for more wins this year, but went 1-6 in one-run games and didn't have the overall pitching to match the top teams.

"We didn't have the pitching depth," Thede said. "We knew that coming in. We knew it would eventually get us."

MUSCATINE (8)

Moss, cf, 3 2 1 0, Calvert, ss, 4 1 2 1, Freilinger, 1b, 4 3 2 1, Herman, c, 4 0 1 1, Lothspeich, cr, 0 1 0 0, Jones, dh, 2 0 0 0, Kovach, 2b, 0 0 0 0, Wagner, p/3b, 1 0 1 1, Wieskamp, cr, 0 0 0 0, McConnaha, lf, 2 0 1 2, Simonsen, rf/p, 2 1 0 1, Minder, 3b, 2 0 0 0, Torres, rf, 1 0 0 0, Burkamper, p, 1 0 0 0. Totals 26 8 8 7.

PRAIRIE (6)

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Velvick, cf, 2 1 1 2, Mougin, ss, 4 1 1 1, Carlson, 2b, 4 0 1 1, Butz, 3b, 3 0 0 0, Votroubek, 1b, 3 1 1 0, Hammer, rf/p, 3 1 0 0, Peters, rf, 0 0 0 0, Alberts, p/rf, 2 1 1 0, Adams, p, 0 0 0 0, Peters, cr, 0 0 0 0, Steffens, p, 0 0 0 0, Beckman, dh, 2 0 0 0, Pond, c/ph, 2 0 0 0, Schulte, cr, 0 0 0 0, Davison, lf, 3 1 2 2. Totals 28 6 7 6.

Muscatine 201 104 0 - 8 8 1

Prairie 020 400 0 - 6 7 1

Wagner, Simonsen (4), Burkamper (5) and Herman; Alberts, Adams (5), Steffens (6), Hammer (7) and Pond. W - Burkamper (8-4). L - Adams (3-6). 2B - Calvert, Velvick, Mougin, Carlson, Davison. SB - Wieskamp, Velvick, Schulte.