

Stars end Red Top's IVL reign

Written by Mike Condon
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WALFORD - The regular-season Iowa Valley League championship has been the exclusive property of Red Top since the summer of 2011.

That all changed here Sunday afternoon as the Fairfax Stars secured the 2017 title after downing Watkins, 5-2, in the second game of a doubleheader.

Watkins got home runs from Jonny Frese and Luke Farley to post a 3-1 win in the opener.

Player/Manager Chico Lizarraga's Stars, with a roster featuring a number of former Cedar Rapids Kennedy standouts, sits at 15-3 with only a 5 p.m. twinbill next Sunday at Norway remaining. Red Top fell back into a tie for second with Norway at 10-8 after being swept by Walford, 8-2 and 15-7, on Sunday in Norway while the Bandits were sweeping a twinbill from Williamsburg.

After clinching the title, the Stars posed for a quick team photo and then celebrated quietly with some cold beverages.

"We've got a good group of veterans and a good bunch of young guys," said Lizarraga, who also serves as an assistant coach on Bret Hoyer's staff at Kennedy. "We have a really good chemistry together and that's why I think we came out on top of the league."

The Stars have been a team that has adapted all season. They haven't played a home game all summer in Fairfax. They have played home games at Kennedy and Iowa City West as well as here on Sunday. Lizarraga said the reason for not playing in Fairfax all summer had to do with the field.

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"We'd love to play at Fairfax," he said. "The field conditions there haven't been up to standards. We have a lot of college players and we don't want anybody to get hurt.

"We'll play anywhere," Lizarraga continued. "We just love to play baseball."

After taking the opener, Watkins jumped to an early 2-1 lead in the nightcap as Frese and Farley had back-to-back doubles in the first inning and Brady Stramer doubled in the second and scored on a ground-out.

The Stars took the lead in the fourth, scoring three times off Watkins starter Luke Franzenburg, who was hurt by two errors behind him. The big blow in the frame came from shortstop Alex Hayden, who rocketed a two-RBI double to the gap in right-center field.



Lizarraga provided an insurance run in the fifth when his bloop single to right plated Tyler Dralle, who reached on a double.

Pitchers Adam Lloyd and Cody Bell did the rest. Lloyd, who got the win, allowed two runs on four hits over the first four innings. Bell didn't give up a hit in his three innings of work and earned the save.

"Our pitching has been excellent the whole year," Lizarraga said. "They throw strikes. They pound the zone. Our defense had been good too. We make all the routine plays. If you pitch well and play good defense, you win ballgames."

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Watkins (8-10) got solid relief pitching from Kyle Shimp and Franzenburg to gain the win in the first game. Shimp allowed just three hits over four innings, striking out eight. Franzenburg pitched a clean bottom of the seventh to earn a save.

Dralle and former Linn-Mar standout Adam Stolley each had two hits for the Stars in Game 1.

The next order of business for the Stars after finishing regular-season play next Sunday is to take another title away from Red Top.

Red Top is the two-time defending IABA state champions. That two-weekend tournament is played the first two weekends of August.

"We love where we are sitting heading into August," Lizarraga said. "Our goal from the beginning was to win the end of the year tournament."