

Stars win second IVL title in row

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It was poetic justice that it happened where so many of them honed their skills in high school.

Sunday's Iowa Valley League doubleheader between the Stars and Watkins was played at Herkelman Field on the Cedar Rapids Kennedy campus. Many of the Stars played as preps for the Cougars under Coach Bret Hoyer and the late Bill Herkelman, for whom



the field is named.

The Stars looked right at home Sunday, winning a pair of hard-fought games, 4-1 and 2-1, to clinch their second IVL title in a row with one week left in the regular season. The sweep pushed the Stars to 13-5 while Watkins, which has lost six one-run decisions this summer, fell to 6-10.

Seven of the 12 players who played in Sunday's twinbill are Kennedy graduates.

"It's fun, the friendships you have built up, playing with past Cougars," said catcher Matt Berst, now a member of the Iowa Hawkeyes. "It's just so special to have fun and play the right way."

That "right way" Sunday included stellar defense in both games. The Stars made just one error and made several spectacular plays that kept Watkins off the scoreboard.

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"Baseball is a game of inches and it comes down to little things," said Stars player/coach Chico Lizarraga. "When you pitch well and play defense well and have timely hits, good things happen."

Watkins grabbed 1-0 lead in the opener on an RBI ground-out from Brady Stramer in the first. However, the Mudhens could muster only two hits the rest of the way off Stars right-hander Austin Czerwiec.

Watkins batters made plenty of contact, fanning just four times, but the Stars defense, namely Adam Stolley in center field and Ben Larson in right, made the plays.

Alex Hayden drove in a pair of runs in the opener for the Stars. Berst had two hits and drove in a run.

Watkins had just four singles off Czerwiec. The Mudhens turned the defensive play of the game when Jeremy Schneiders threw out Stolley at the plate on a Berst single to left in the third inning.

Game 2 was a pitchers duel between the Stars' Blake Hargens and Watkins' Skylar Frese. Stolley's sacrifice fly to center plated Eric Weisbrod in the second to give the Stars a 1-0 lead. A Jacob Volz ground-out allowed Schneiders to score the tying run for Watkins in the third.

The Stars used vintage fundamental baseball to secure the sweep. Jacob Henry led off the fifth with a bloop single to left. After Lizarraga flied to center, Henry took off from first and Hayden took a Frese pitch to right on a perfect hit-and-run to put runners on the corners for Weisbrod. His sacrifice fly to left gave the Stars the lead.

Watkins threatened in the top of the sixth. Nick Brown led off with a single and, one out later, took third on Stramer's ringing double off the right field fence.

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That brought Frese to the plate. He hit a sinking liner to center that Stolley timed perfectly to make the catch and his throw to Berst at the plate was perfect to cut down Brown trying to score the tying run.

And to put icing on the cake, Ben Larson made a diving catch in right in the top of the seventh with the potential tying run on second again for the Mudhens.

It was a low-key celebration after the game. The Stars did gather for a team photo, but even that was almost an afterthought.

"This was our goal," Lizarraga said. "We're going to treat next week like any other week except we might give our pitchers a little rest ahead of the state tournament."

The Stars close the regular season with a 5 p.m. doubleheader next Sunday at Norway while the Mudhens finish up with a 1 p.m. twinbill at Walford.