

Berst ready for next step at Iowa

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Matt Berst certainly looks the part.

That "look" would be one of a starting catcher for the University of Iowa next season.

The former Cedar Rapids Kennedy all-state catcher was a late addition to the Hawkeye baseball program last summer after originally committing to Illinois State. The 6-foot, 200-pounder spent his freshman year backing up Tyler Cropley, who was selected in the eighth round of the Major League Baseball Draft by the Washington Nationals.

With Cropley's departure, a huge void needs to be filled. Berst, who is spending the summer playing for the Stars in the Iowa Valley League, is one of the contenders to replace Cropley.

He had a stellar prep career at Kennedy. Twice Berst was named first-team all-state by the Iowa High School Baseball Coaches Association. He batted .416 as a senior with six home runs despite playing with a shoulder injury much of the season.

Former Cougar teammates Zach Daniels and Sammy Lizarraga were part of the Iowa program and sold Hawkeye Coach Rick Heller on his skills. Heller made a late offer to Berst and he jumped at the chance to play for the Hawkeyes."

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"Coach Heller had a lot of confidence in me and he wants us to bring that to the field every day," Berst said. "He really stresses doing things the right way, all the little things including being a good teammate and playing hard."

Berst has been impressive this summer playing for the Stars, both with the bat and with his strong, accurate throwing arm. He said he learned a lot watching Cropley, who led the Hawkeyes in a number of offensive categories last season.

"It was very special playing behind a guy like that," Berst said. "He has so much talent, but he is also grounded. I just tried to soak up all the information he gave me and learn from him. Not everybody coming into college gets that kind of opportunity."

With Cropley handling most of the catching duties, Berst had limited action as a freshman. He hit .222 in 10 games and did not commit any errors in the field. There will be plenty of competition to replace Cropley. Former Iowa City High standout Brett McCleary was also a freshman on last year's team. The incoming recruiting class includes Austin Martin, a junior college transfer from Southeastern Community College in Burlington.

"It's going to be very tough competition. I'm good friends with McCleary and we have another catcher in Austin coming in so I will just have to work hard and leave it in the coaches' hands," he said.

Playing this summer with the Stars has been enjoyable for Berst. The Stars clinched a second straight IVL title by sweeping Watkins on Sunday. He has reconnected with a number of former teammates from Kennedy, but one relationship is a bit more special.

Stars player/coach Chico Lizarraga was the Kennedy catcher when Berst was growing up. Lizarraga served as one of Berst's coaches with the Cougars and now the two are teammates with the Stars. Each catches one game of a doubleheader while the other serves as the designated hitter.

"We complement each other very well," said Lizarraga. "It's nice to be able have him catch one

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game and me the other. It keeps both of us fresh.

"I'm very proud of Matt," he continued. "He's the best defensive catcher in the state of Iowa in my opinion. He's a tremendous leader both on and off the field."