

Larson's bat sends J-Hawks past Kennedy

Written by Tom Fruehling

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Jefferson's Lucas Larson and Kennedy's Zach Daniels played for years on the same youth league baseball team from the time they were little kids.

But until Tuesday night, the J-Hawk junior had never batted against the Cougars' ace pitcher.

And he wasn't very nice to his childhood pal.

Larson's doubles in the first and fifth innings served as a warm-up for his dramatic last at bat:

Score tied 5-5 with two outs and the bases empty in the bottom of the seventh inning. With one strike against him, Larson is looking for another fast ball, but instead Daniels dishes up a change-up.

And in the words of Jefferson pitcher Ben Koering, "Lucas just smoked it."

His walk-off homer over the left field fence wins the game 6-5 and maybe even gives new life to a team that was deep in the doldrums. The J-Hawks (19-13 13-9 MVC) had lost six straight, including a 11-1 pasting by Kennedy in five innings the night before.

The Cougars, meanwhile, came in ranked third in Class 4A and sporting a nifty 25-3 record (leading the MVC Valley Division at 19-2).

"A win like this is really going to get us back on track like we were at the start of the season," said Larson. "We haven't really been hitting the ball lately. But we did tonight."

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The loss was the first for the season for Daniels (now 6-1). He'd allowed only 30 hits and two earned runs in 44 innings pitched this year. Opponents were only hitting .199 against him.

The J-Hawks banged out 10 hits, including solo home runs by Larson and Koering as well as a three-run blast by sparkling sophomore Spencer Van Scoyoc.

"Tip your cap to those guys," said the always-gracious Kennedy Coach Bret Hoyer afterward. "They're a good hitting team, and they showed that when we played them in the Metro tournament."

The Cougars won that early-season matchup 20-10 after trailing 10-6.

"We score five runs, and that should be enough to win with our top-of-the-line pitching," continued Hoyer

But Hoyer said Daniels was not as sharp as usual, and Jefferson took advantage.

"He was strong, but he didn't locate his pitches well. He hasn't pitched for a week, and I'll take the blame. I should have worked him a little more between starts."

Junior J-Hawk hurler Koering, too, struggled at times but was able to battle through to the end. The hot-hitting Cougars pounced on him right from the start.

Lead-off batter Derek Jacobus smacked the first pitch to center for a single, and Daniels followed with a chopper through the middle. A double by Sammy Lizarraga immediately put Kennedy ahead 1-0.

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The Cougars added two more in the second on a deep homer to right by Kyle Brewer and picked up another in the third when Lizarraga scored on a throwing error.

"We were behind 4-1 after three innings, and Monday night we were 5-1 after three," pointed out Jefferson Coach Kyle Rodenkirk. "We could have just rolled over and died. But, instead, the whole team really executed tonight.

"The resilience of these guys of these guys is just fantastic. We've been in kind of a funk lately. But these guys believe in themselves."

Instead of folding their tent, the J-Hawks rallied for three runs in the fifth on Van Scoyoc's shot way over the right field fence.

"I was trying to get a base hit," he explained.

And Koering helped his own cause with a homer in the sixth to knot the game at 5-5.

"I think that gave us some confidence," he said, "that we were able to tie it."

His coach applauded the team effort.

"We got some clutch hits," said Rodenkirk. "And Ben did a great job on the hill keeping us in the game. He's a gamer.

"I'm just real happy for these guys. It was a great win for them."

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As for Larson, he said he's never experienced anything like his late-game heroics.

"Nothing like this," he grinned. "It's a first for me.

"And I talked to Zach (Daniels) after the game. He was real nice about it. He's a classy guy."