

Cougars top No.1 Hempstead for MVC title

Written by Jim Ecker

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Kennedy Coach Bret Hoyer faced a tricky proposition Monday night.

He wanted to give the Cougars a good shot at winning the Mississippi Valley Conference title without jeopardizing their chances in the Class 4A substate baseball tournament that starts Friday.

It worked out perfectly.

The third-ranked Cougars edged top-ranked Dubuque Hempstead, 4-2, in the first game of their MVC doubleheader to clinch the conference title and Hoyer was able to juggle his two best pitchers to keep them fresh for the postseason tournament.

The game had a dramatic ending when Kennedy relief pitcher Zach Daniels snagged a vicious line drive with the bases loaded and fired to third base for a double play.

Sammy Lizarraga tossed the first four innings for the Cougars and Daniels pitched the final three frames, giving them a good tuneup before Kennedy hosts Pleasant Valley in the substate opener Friday.

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Kennedy began the game with a 21-3 record in the Mississippi Division of the MVC, with Hempstead in second place at 20-4. The Cougars needed a split in their showdown to claim the league title and they took care of business in the opener.

"That's a pretty neat deal," said Hoyer, who captured his seventh conference title and third in the last four years. "That's what neat about the conference championship. It shows what kind of team you've got, because it takes a lot of depth to be able to win a conference title. And we have it.

"We played at a very high level against a terrific team when it counted the most, and that's encouraging going into the tournament."

Hempstead won the second game, 7-5, but the conference race had already been decided by then.

Kennedy finished the league campaign with a 22-4 record to claim the Mississippi Division title. The Cougars finished with the best mark in either division - the Mississippi or Valley - for overall bragging rights.



Hempstead finished with a 21-5 mark in the conference.

Hempstead owned a 2-1 lead heading into the bottom of the fifth inning of the opener, but Kennedy responded with three runs for a 4-2 advantage. Daniels knocked in Derek Jacobus to tie the game, 2-2, with an RBI single to center.

Dalles Jacobus, promoted to the varsity from the sophomore team two weeks ago, snapped the 2-2 deadlock with a two-run, two-out single.

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Hempstead loaded the bases with one out in the top of the seventh inning against Daniels, who was struggling with his control. Evan Kolker, a .330 hitter with 34 RBIs, ripped a 2-1 pitch that appeared headed to center field and a possible 4-4 tie.

Daniels, an excellent fielder, snared the screamer on the fly and fired to third-baseman Ben Sass to catch the Hempstead runner off base for the game-ending double play.

"There's not much to describe," said Daniels, an excellent fielder. "I put my glove up. I saw it coming - barely. And I snagged it.

"I caught it right by my left ear," he said. "I'm not really sure how far away. But I've caught a couple of those over the past few years."

Daniels said there was no time to be frightened. "It was just a bang-bang play," he said.

Daniels plays second base for Kennedy when he's not pitching. He has fast hands and quick reflexes.

"He's that type of athlete with fast-twitch muscle fibers to react like he did," said Hoyer. "And then to have the presence of mind - and for Ben Sass to have a quick reaction to cover third to double them off to end it - that's a pretty good play."

Kennedy and Hempstead were postponed by rain two weeks ago, which pushed their showdown to the final night of the conference race between two of the top teams in the state.

"It just shows what we can do," said Daniels of the conference title. "They (the Mustangs) are at the top for a reason."

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Hempstead left town with a 34-5 overall mark.

Kennedy (28-5) will host Pleasant Valley in a doubleheader Tuesday at 5 p.m. on Senior Night. The Cougars and Pleasant Valley will meet again in the substate opener Friday night at Kennedy.

Game 1

Hempstead 010 010 0 - 2 6 2

Kennedy 001 030 x - 4 3 1

W - Daniels. L - Vaassen.

Game 2

Hempstead 100 402 0 - 7 10 2

Kennedy 041 000 0 - 5 7 3

W - Millius. L - Hargens.