

J-Hawks place 4th at state softball

Written by Jim Ecker

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Cedar Rapids Jefferson softball coach Brian Erbe is rooting for all the other teams in the Mississippi Valley Conference to get better and better.

That may sound odd, but Erbe thinks stiffer competition from MVC teams would help the J-Hawks have a better chance of winning another state title in the years to come.

Jefferson lost to West Des Moines Valley, 6-5, in a consolation game at the state tournament Friday afternoon in Fort Dodge to finish fourth in the tournament after placing seventh in 2014 and fifth in 2013.

The third-ranked J-Hawks made a strong showing in Fort Dodge. They beat Linn-Mar, 6-3, in the opening round, then faced two of the best teams in the state and dropped one-run games on consecutive days.

Jefferson lost to second-ranked Johnston Thursday, 2-1, then lost to top-ranked West Des Moines Valley by a single tally Friday. The J-Hawks came close to beating a pair of elite teams, but fell a tad short both times.

Waukee played Johnston in the championship game Friday night in a battle of teams from the Central Iowa Metropolitan League, making this the 13th straight year a CIML team will win a state crown.

This year's state tournament featured No. 1 West Des Moines Valley, No. 2 Johnston, No. 5 Waukee, Urbandale and Ankeny from the CIML, which is loaded with outstanding clubs. Erbe feels they push each other to improve.

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"They play each other on a weekly basis. Look at their schedules," Erbe said Thursday after Jefferson lost to Johnston. "They play Dowling, they play Waukee, they play Lincoln, they play Urbandale, they play West Des Moines Valley.

"They play that type of competition every day," he said. "They play teams like us two or three times a week. And because of our conference, we play some people who aren't quite as competitive."

Jefferson finished the season with a 36-9 record. Kennedy Dighton and Tori Brandon had two hits for the J-Hawks against West Des Moines Valley.

Anna Gernant belted two home runs for West Des Moines Valley. Hailey Heinen also hit a home run for Valley, which finished the season with a 37-7 record.

Jefferson won state titles in 1983, 1997 and 1998 under former coach Larry Niemeyer.