

## Prairie clinches tie for softball title

Written by Jim Ecker

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Gabi Carter began playing for the Cedar Rapids Prairie softball team as an eighth grader in 2011 and experienced some lean times with the Hawks before Joe Yegge became the head coach three years ago.

Now a senior, Carter can truly appreciate what it feels like to win a Mississippi Valley Conference title after those early struggles.

Prairie clinched at least a tie for the Mississippi Division crown in the Mississippi Valley Conference Tuesday night by splitting a doubleheader with the Kennedy Cougars at Kennedy.

Prairie rallied for a 6-3 victory in the opener. Kennedy cruised in the nightcap, 10-0 in six innings, behind a two-hit shutout by Andrea McEachran.

The split left Prairie with a 16-8 record in the MVC with two games left in the regular season. Waterloo West split its twinbill with Jefferson Tuesday night and finished the conference campaign with a 16-10 record.

Prairie can win an outright title Wednesday when it plays a doubleheader at Waterloo East, which has a 7-17 record in the league.

"It's definitely a great accomplishment, but we weren't working for that," said Carter, an excellent third baseman for the Hawks. "We're working for being better than we were last year and being as great as we can be. Winning a conference title is icing on the cake."

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Prairie joined the Mississippi Valley Conference in 1986 and won an MVC softball title in 1988, making this their first title in 27 years. "Yeah, it's been a long time," said Carter with a smile.



Prairie won six games in 2011 when Carter was an eighth grader and won eight games in 2012 when she was a freshman. Yegge became the head coach in 2013 and promptly led the Hawks to the state tournament in his first year.

Carter has seen the lean times and the good times.

"It's definitely been great," she said of the resurgence. "I've always seen the talent within the team, especially when I was an eighth grader and when I was a freshman.

"Having somebody like Joe that really believes in us and really sees how good we can be, I think it really makes a difference within the whole team."

Yegge is also the head softball coach at Kirkwood Community College and Carter plans to play for him next year with the Eagles as well.

Yegge is proud of winning the conference title, especially with such a young team. Carter and Mallory Jones, an all-state shortstop earlier in her career, are the only seniors on the club, but Jones has missed the season with a knee injury.

Prairie won the title with Carter and a bunch of underclassmen.

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"We're excited about it," said Yegge. "I'm happy for the girls. It's something they've never seen in their lifetime and not a lot of people around here have seen."

But like Carter, Yegge put the accomplishment in perspective.

"It's more special when they're down at the 20-year reunion with their own kids and they can talk about being the team to win one," he said. "It's awesome, we've been talking about it, but our ultimate goal is to get to state. It's a nice little added thing for our program."

Prairie trailed 3-0 heading into the top of the sixth inning in the opener at Kennedy Tuesday. The Hawks exploded for five runs in the inning with RBIs from Kristin Wahlert, Amanda Pipolo and Taylor Moenk and a ringing two-run double by Carter. They got an insurance run in the seventh inning when Neila Bell socked a long home run.

Bell went 3-for-4 in the opener and Carter was 2-for-4 with two doubles.

Megan Weber collected a double, home run and three RBIs for Kennedy in the opener.

Ashley Hamilton belted a long homer for Kennedy in the second game. McEachran starred on the mound with her two-hitter and also went 2-for-4 with a walk-off single in the bottom of the sixth when the Cougars made it 10-0.

The eighth-ranked Cougars are enjoying a fine season at 27-11 overall and 17-7 in the Mississippi Valley Conference, good for third place behind Iowa City West and Jefferson in the Valley Division.

Prairie is 24-11 overall.