

McCullough's 1-hitter lifts Lions to split

Written by Mike Condon

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After a crushing defeat in the opener, Linn-Mar was in need of a boost in the nightcap of its Mississippi Valley Conference doubleheader with Iowa City High on Friday night.

They got that and more from the unlikelyst of sources.

Senior Nick McCullough, who battled injury problems as a junior and had never gone more than four innings in a varsity game, came through with the performance of his life. All he did was toss a complete game one-hitter, striking out six and walking one as the Lions topped the Little Hawks, 3-0, at Linn-Mar.

McCullough's outing helped pick up a Lion team that led much of the opener only to see City High push across a pair of runs in the top of the seventh to rally for a 4-3 win.

The split leaves the Lions at 11-10 overall, 7-5 in MVC play. City High is 10-7, 8-4.

Linn-Mar Coach Chad Lechner was emotional when speaking of McCullough's effort. The senior right-hander has been around the program for several years, starting as a bat boy before his high school years. He has waited his turn and at the end of a long week of baseball for the Lions, came through when his team needed it most.

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"A senior on the mound gave us a bulldog performance," Lechner said. "We really needed somebody to step up and his performance on the mound gave us confidence after a tough loss. The kids played great defense behind him. He was in control on the mound and we needed that more than anything."

As his teammates lamented the tough loss in the opener, McCullough knew what he had to try and do.

"That was definitely the best game I have ever pitched in my life," he said. "I was just trying to be a senior leader, going out there trying to keep my team in the game hoping we would get enough runs to win."



The Lion offense did just enough. Kyle Mortensen's one-out triple in the third plated Justin Wyant, who had been hit by a pitch. In the fourth, Jimmy Roth tripled home Austin Stroschein, who had walked. Roth scored the third run when City High catcher Tyler Stika attempted to pick him off third and sailed the throw into left field.

After that, it was all McCullough. He allowed a one-out single to Stika in the fourth, but only one City High batter reached after that point, when McCullough hit Eric Kinney with one out in the fifth.

The key pitch for McCullough was his curve ball, which had the Little Hawks off balance the entire game.

"He was throwing it any count he wanted to and was throwing it for strikes," Lechner said. "They are a quality hitting team and he kept them off-balance with it."

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Even though he was pitching well, the Lion bullpen was up behind McCullough over the final three innings because he had never been past the fourth.

"I kept my pitch count pretty low," he said. "It wasn't too bad but I think I was running a lot on adrenalin."

The Lions were oh so close to a sweep. Mitch Stickney and Stroschein had RBI singles in a three-run third, staking the Lions to a 3-1 lead in the opener. City High cut it to 3-2 on an RBI double from Josh Crosby in the fifth.

After a clean sixth, Linn-Mar reliever Ben Larson gave up a single to JJ Gevock, and one out later, a double to Stika, putting runners on second and third.

At that point Lechner went to one of his top hurlers, senior Justin Wyant in an attempt to close out the game. A wild pitch allowed Gevock to score the tying run. Sam Mrstik then rapped a single up the middle, plating Stika with what proved to be the winning run.

"We were playing for strikeouts there," Lechner said of his decision to bring on Wyant in the seventh. "We had a couple options out of the pen, but he is proven on the mound. Give (City High) credit for having tough at-bats against him and coming through with the big hit."

The Lions have been in a number of close games during the first half of the season. Lechner believes the key over the back portion of the schedule is more offensive consistency.

"I think sometimes we try to do too much with the ball instead of hitting it where it is pitched," he said. "If we can do that a little more consistently I think we'll score a few more runs and not have to play so close at the end of so many games."

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GAME 1

IOWA CITY HIGH (4): Wieland, p-2b, 2 1 0 0, Stika, c-p, 4 1 1 0, Mrstik, ss, 3 1 2 1, Crosby, lf-c, 2 0 2 2, Simpson, 2b-1b, 3 0 1 0, Haring, rf-lf, 3 0 0 0, Forrester, 1b, 1 0 0 0, Kinney, ph-lf, 2 0 0 0, Hasler, 3b, 3 0 0 0, Gevock, cf, 3 1 1 0. Totals 26 4 7 3.

LINN-MAR (3): Mortensen, cf, 3 0 0 0, Strellner, ss, 2 1 2 0, Stickney p-rf, 4 1 1 1, Stroschein, 1b, 3 0 2 1, Renner, cr-pr, 0 0 0 0, Roth, 2b, 4 0 1 1, Banks, 3b, 2 0 0 0, Ollinger, c, 3 0 1 0, Jennings, lf, 3 0 0 0, Larson, rf-p, 3 1 1 0, Wyant, p, 0 0 0 0. Totals: 27 3 8 3.

Iowa City High 100 010 2 - 4 7 3
Linn-Mar 003 000 0 - 3 8 0

Wieland, Stika (4) and Stika, Crosby (4). Stickney, Larson (5), Wyant (7) and Ollinger. W - Stika, L - Larson. 2B - Stika, Crosby. SB - Crosby, 2, Mrstik 2.

GAME 2

IOWA CITY HIGH (0): Wieland, 2b, 2 0 0 0, Stika, c, 3 0 1 0, Mrstik, ss, 3 0 0 0, Crosby, lf-p, 3 0 0 0, Simpson, 1b, 3 0 0 0, Haring, rf, 2 0 0 0, Kinney, p, 1 0 0 0, Fountain, cr, 0 0 0 0, Hostager, lf, 0 0 0 0, Hasler, 3b, 2 0 0 0, Gevock, cf, 2 0 0 0. Totals 21 0 1 0.

LINN-MAR (3): Mortensen, cf, 3 0 2 1, Strellner, ss, 4 0 1 0, Stickney rf, 3 0 0 0, Stroschein, 1b, 2 1 0 0, Roth, 2b, 3 1 2 1, Banks, 3b, 3 0 2 0, Ollinger, c, 2 0 0 0, Renner, cr, 0 0 0 0, Jacobs, dh, 2 0 0 0, Kane, ph, 1 0 0 0, Gross, pr, 0 0 0 0, Wyant, lf, 1 1 0 0, McCullough, p, 0 0 0 0. Totals 24 3 7 2.

Iowa City High 000 000 0 - 0 1 1
Linn-Mar 001 200 x- 3 7 1

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Kinney, Crosby (6) and Stika. McCullough and Ollinger. W - McCullough, L - Kinney. 3B - Mortensen, Roth. SB - Strellner, Banks.