

Keller's clout sends Xavier to state

Written by Jim Ecker

Wednesday, 24 July 2013 23:12 - Last Updated Wednesday, 24 July 2013 23:46



Mitch Keller was exhausted after throwing 121 pitches Wednesday night in the Class 4A substate finals, but he wasn't too tired to hit one of the most dramatic home runs in school history to earn the Xavier Saints a trip to the state tournament.

Keller belted a three-run homer in the bottom of the 12th inning to give the 10th-ranked Saints a tense 8-5 victory over Prairie in a classic three-hour battle at Ken Charipar Field.

Xavier (25-15) will face Sioux City East (30-9) in the opening round of the Class 4A state tournament at Principal Park in Des Moines on Wednesday at 6 p.m.

Keller walked the leadoff man in the top of the ninth inning with the score tied, 5-5, and he did not argue when Coach Dave Schemmel elected to make a change.

"I was pretty tired," he conceded.

Keller leads the Saints in RBIs and Schemmel wanted to keep his bat in the game, so the coach moved Keller to shortstop, switched Corbin Woods to third baseman and summoned Zack Brown from third base to the mound.

Those moves paid off handsomely in the bottom of the 12th.

Ty Mougín, the fourth Prairie pitcher, got the first two outs in the 12th inning but hit Ryan

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Meaney with a pitch and walked Jake Harriott. That brought Keller to the plate in a game-winning situation.



Keller bats ninth in the lineup, but he began the game with a .342 batting average, three homers and 34 RBIs. He knows what to do with the stick and crushed a 1-1 pitch from Mouglin to deep left field for the three-run homer.

"It's so surreal. I knew it was gone," said Keller. "I looked up and saw it and I put my arms up in the air."

Keller, a lanky junior, has committed to the University of North Carolina as a pitcher, but he made his mark Wednesday night as a clutch hitter.

There was some confusion on the home run. Harriott, the runner on first base, touched second base but never bothered to touch third base or home plate, preferring to join a celebration in the middle of the diamond instead.

Meaney, the runner from second base, touched third base and crossed the plate, and Keller circled the bases and touched them all.

Prairie Coach Matt Thede appealed that Meaney (the lead runner) had missed third base and therefore the inning should be over with nobody scoring, but the umpires assured Thede that Meaney had touched third. Thede could have appealed that Harriott missed third, which would have reduced Keller's home run to an RBI single and made the final score 6-5 instead of 8-5.

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The Hawks did not pursue that appeal and home-plate umpire Jeff Frese ruled it a three-run homer.

Keller, a little dazed after the game, mistakenly thought it was a 10-inning game rather than a 12-inning marathon, but it didn't matter. He got the biggest hit of the season.

"I got a pitch to drive and I was going up there hacking," he said. "I didn't want to go back on the field."

Xavier will be making its sixth trip to the state tournament, but first in Class 4A. The Saints won the Class 3A state title in 2006, and all five of their previous trips to state were in Class 3A.

"These guys want to compete with the best and 4A is the best," said Schemmel. "You want to play with those guys and see where you stack up."

The Class 4A state tournament will begin Wednesday with Johnston (26-12) facing Linn-Mar (27-15) at noon. Des Moines East (36-4) will play Davenport North (23-15) at 2 p.m.

The evening session features Xavier against Sioux City East at 6 p.m., followed by Ankeny against Clinton at 8 p.m. The Saints are the No.6 seed and Sioux City East is No.3. Des Moines East is the No.1 seed in the field.

The Prairie Hawks (27-13) were at a disadvantage Wednesday. The Hawks used many of their top pitchers to beat Marshalltown in the substate semifinals Monday and Tuesday in a suspended game that took two days to finish.

Brennan Hammer, Prairie's top pitcher, tossed 2 2/3 innings in relief against Marshalltown Tuesday and Thede had to remove him from the mound Wednesday after he threw six innings

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in relief against the Saints. High school pitchers cannot throw more than nine innings on two consecutive days, so Hammer had to surrender the ball after blanking Xavier in the 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th and 11th innings.

"I was glad to see Hammer out," said Schemmel.

"He was dealing out there," said Thede. "That's the best he's thrown all year. He looked phenomenal out there, keeping those guys off-balance."

Meanwhile, the Saints were well-armed and rested after drawing a bye in the semifinals as the No.1 seed in the substate tournament. Brown tossed four shutout innings for Xavier after relieving Keller in the ninth inning and got the victory.

Thede thought his team may have run out of steam.

"Man, we looked a little tired, I think," he said. "We looked a little tired in those later innings, but man, we just battled. What a battle. What a battle."

Xavier enjoyed a successful three-year run at the state tournament in 2005, 2006 and 2007 by finishing second, first and second again. Now the Saints are returning to state for the first time since 2008.

"It will be a great experience," said Keller. "I can't wait to go."

PRAIRIE (5): Becker, 2b, 5 0 0 0, T.Mougin, ss/p, 6 1 1 0, Hammer, rf/p, 4 1 0 0, Butz, 3b/ss, 4 0 1 0, Benson, pr, 0 0 0 0, Davison, lf, 5 1 1 0, Votroubek, 1b, 4 1 0 0, Meyer, pr, 0 0 0 0, Beckman, dh, 6 0 2 0, Adams, p, 0 0 0 0, Peters, rf, 0 0 0 0, Stallman, cf, 6 1 1 1, Day, c, 4 0 3 2, Benson, cr, 0 0 0 0. Totals 44 5 9 3.

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XAVIER (8): Grimm, cf, 5 1 0 0, Woods, ss/3b, 3 1 2 0, Pick, 1b, 6 1 1 0, Brown, 3b/p, 6 2 1 1, Ratz, rf, 4 0 1 2, Miller, pr/rf, 0 0 0 0, Hammerberg, c, 6 0 2 1, Clarahan, cr, 0 0 0 0, Meaney, lf, 4 1 0 0, Helms, dh, 2 0 0 0, K.Dlouhy, 2b, 0 0 0 0, Harriott, ph/dh, 2 1 0 0, Keller, p/ss, 5 1 2 3, Drahozal, cr, 0 0 0 0. Totals 43 8 9 7.

Prairie 200 201 000 000 - 5 9 4

Xavier 400 010 000 003 - 8 9 3

Adams, Milks (5), Hammer (6), T.Mougin (12) and Day. Keller, Brown (9) and Hammerberg. W - Brown. L - T.Mougin. 2B - Brown, Ratz. HR - Keller. SB - Woods 2.