

No.3 Kennedy escapes Pleasant Valley

Written by Jim Ecker

Friday, 18 July 2014 22:00 - Last Updated Friday, 18 July 2014 22:14

Kennedy junior Mitchell Gaffey was feeling a little down on himself after getting picked off second base in the fifth inning of a tie ballgame Friday night, but he was a happy fellow after he scored the winning run in extra innings.



Gaffey raced home on an infield grounder with one out in the bottom of the eighth inning as the third-ranked Cougars escaped an upset bid by Pleasant Valley, 3-2, in the tense opening round of the Class 4A substate tournament at Kennedy.

The Cougars (30-6) draw a second-round bye and will host Davenport West or Bettendorf in the substate finals Wednesday night.

Kennedy Coach Bret Hoyer used Gaffey, who has good speed, as a courtesy runner Friday night, so his entire job was to do a good job on the base paths. He got caught napping in the fifth inning of a 2-2 game, but came through when it counted. Sammy Lizarraga led off the bottom of the eighth with a walk and Gaffey went into the game to run for the Kennedy catcher. At that point, Pleasant Valley Coach Rob Wood brought in Ben Kruse to pitch for Austin Suhr, who had thrown the entire game and 116 pitches at that point.

Kruse uncorked a wild pitch, moving Gaffey to second base, then a passed ball moved Gaffey to third base with nobody out. Kruse got Ben Sass on a pop-up to the first baseman for the first out, bringing Tyler Dralle to the plate with the infield in.

Dralle hit a grounder to the Pleasant Valley second baseman, who came up throwing as Gaffey raced toward the plate. It was an errant throw, but Gaffey would have scored anyway. Gaffey had simple instructions from Hoyer on the play.

"If you see the ball on the ground, get in there and score," said Gaffey. "My heart was pumping.

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I was excited. It was a little nerve-wracking."

Gaffey was able to get a big lead at third base because Suhr, who moved to third after leaving the mound, was playing in front of the bag with the infield in.

"His primary lead was huge," said Hoyer. "And he had a fantastic secondary lead. And then he had a great read of contact off the bat.

"They didn't have a chance, especially with how fast he is. He executed that to perfection."

Kennedy was heavily favored to win the game as the No.1 seed against the No.6 seed, especially with Pleasant Valley sporting a 13-24 record, but Hoyer knew the Spartans had battled injuries to Brock Neuhaus and Suhr - their top pitchers - and were a dangerous club with Suhr pitching and swinging a lethal bat.

Suhr went 2-for-3 with a triple, RBI and intentional walk in addition to his heroic efforts on the mound.



"That's the worst 6-seed draw a No.1 seed could possibly get in the state of Iowa," said Hoyer. "And they showed you why right here.

"I'm glad everybody got to see how good they were. We were extremely worried about them."

Suhr, a hard-throwing junior, suffered an oblique strain on his left side early in the season and

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missed several weeks, but he gave the Spartans everything he had against Kennedy.

"I think we played our hearts out," said Suhr, who was charged with the loss. "We came together and finally put some passion in the game."

Suhr walked Lizarraga on four straight pitches to start the bottom of the eighth inning and was obviously gassed. "When it comes down to it," he said of his 116-pitch performance, "you don't feel anything because you want your team to win."

Wood was proud of his hurler.

"His determination to get healthy, come back and be the district starter, along with swinging the bat ... The kid is just a competitor," said Wood. "He goes out there and plays his heart out."

Pleasant Valley scored two runs against Lizarraga in the top of the first inning, with the triple by Suhr the big blow. Daniels replaced Lizarraga on the mound for the top of the third inning and did not allow a run in six innings.

Hoyer planned to split the game between the pitchers, but Daniels thought he'd get the ball a little later in the game after starting the contest at second base.

"I wasn't expecting that early, but I knew I was probably going to come in at some point," he said.

Daniels escaped a massive jam in the top of the seventh inning when the Spartans loaded the bases with two outs on an infield single, a double by Collin Banks and the intentional walk to Suhr.

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Daniels nearly caught Garrett Duncan looking with a 2-2 fastball for the third out, but the pitch was ruled a tad outside for a full count. That meant the runners would be going on the next pitch and a walk would have forced in a run.

Daniels fired another fastball and Duncan popped up to first baseman Jimmy Cunningham. "It was pretty intense," said Daniels, "but I just wanted to get it done for my team."

Wood graciously complimented Kennedy for the victory, but rued the near-miss. The Spartans out-hit the Cougars, 8-4.

"Obviously we played really well," he said. "We hung with one of the top teams in the state. It's unfortunate that somebody has to win and lose that game.

"I felt like we came in prepared mentally and physically to run with these guys."

Hoyer was relieved to win and advance after the Cougars squandered several opportunities earlier in the game.

"Fortunately we survived," he said. "Hopefully the next go-round we'll handle the pressure a little better than we did tonight."

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Suhr, Kruse (8) and Clifton. Lizarraga, Daniels (3) and Isaacs, Lizarraga (3). W - Daniels (8-1. L - Suhr (3-2).