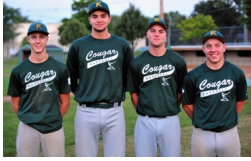


## Cougars take 3 aces to state tourney

Written by Jim Ecker

Tuesday, 29 July 2014 19:53 - Last Updated Tuesday, 29 July 2014 20:01

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Kennedy Coach Bret Hoyer is like a wily poker player with three aces up his sleeve and a big pile of chips on the table.

He wants to use all three aces and win the pot of gold, but he's not sure how quickly to show his hand before trying to cash in.

His top ace is Zach Daniels with his 8-1 record and 1.02 ERA, but Daniels is also his star second baseman and a trump card on defense.

His next ace is Sammy Lizarraga with his 7-0 mark and 1.45 ERA, but Lizarraga is also an all-star catcher with superb defensive skills behind the plate.

His other ace is Blake Hargens with his 8-1 record and 1.10 ERA, but Hargens did not get to pitch in the substate tournament and could be a little rusty.

The third-ranked Cougars (31-6) face Southeast Polk (29-13) in the first round of the Class 4A state tournament Wednesday at approximately 8 p.m. at Principal Park in Des Moines.

Hoyer has to make a decision and the clock is ticking.

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"We've got all three of them ready to do. We can go with either one of the three," he said Monday night, not willing to tip his hand and tell Southeast Polk who to expect, because all three of them are slightly different.

Lizarraga started both of Kennedy's substate games and Daniels pitched in relief, but those games were six days apart with plenty of rest in between.

The state tournament is an entirely different animal. Kennedy will have to win three games in four days to claim the state title, so there's some finesse - and risk - involved with who gets to pitch and when.

"Your mindset is a little different now," said Hoyer. "It's nice to get there, but you want to win it.

"It's hard to name the eight teams that made the tournament last year, but you have a pretty good idea of who won it. So we want to win it."

For the record, Johnston won the Class 4A title last year. Kennedy captured the state crown in 2010, and this is Hoyer's 11th trip to the state tournament in his 22 years as Kennedy's head coach.

The Cougars appear to have the pitching and defense to compete for the crown, but there are no weak teams in the tournament with five clubs from the CIML and three clubs from the Mississippi Valley Conference.

Waukee (35-4) meets Johnston (22-16) at noon Wednesday to get things started. Iowa City West (32-9) faces Dowling Catholic (29-10) at 2 p.m.

The evening session begins at 6 p.m. with Dubuque Hempstead (36-5) playing West Des

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Moines Valley (24-16), followed by Kennedy against Southeast Polk.

Hoyer has learned to expect the unexpected at the state tournament. Gut feelings don't count for much at this stage.

"It doesn't really matter, because you never know how kids are going to perform in that environment," he said. "Our preparation has been good, I like their mindset.

"I like our chances," he said.