

Lizarraga has D-I coaches buzzing

Written by Jim Ecker

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Sammy Lizarraga's phone has been ringing following his sensational performance at the Class 4A state baseball tournament Wednesday night in Des Moines

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Lizarraga struck out 14 batters with a 94 mph fastball and a crackling curveball as the sixth-ranked Kennedy Cougars trimmed Davenport North, 3-2, in the quarterfinals at Principal Park.

Lizarraga, a 6-foot-5 right-hander, has signed with Wabash Valley College in Mt. Carmel, Ill., and plans to enroll at the junior college in a few weeks, but some big-time NCAA Division I programs are making a late pitch to see if he'll change his mind.

"Kansas State called me last week and they called me again last night," Lizarraga said Thursday afternoon. "And then I got call from Coach (Eric) Snider at Louisville last night."

Snider, who played at Northern Iowa, is an assistant coach at Louisville following a long stint at Illinois.

Iowa Coach Rick Heller, who has been chasing Lizarraga this summer, left a message Thursday and Lizarraga planned to call him back. Heller has already offered a partial scholarship, but it was not enough money to make Lizarraga change his mind.

"Iowa has always been on me, but they don't have the money is the problem," he said.

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As of early Thursday afternoon, Lizarraga fully intends to pack his bags in a few weeks and enroll at Wabash.

"Yes, that's the plan right now," he said. "Unless something big comes up where there's a lot of money at a school I really want to go to, then it might change.

"I like what Wabash does, I like the opportunities that come out of it, so that's what I plan on doing."

Wabash coach Rob Fournier has a strong record of sending his graduates to Division I schools and pro baseball, which is where Lizarraga wants to go some day. Fournier knows what Lizarraga did Wednesday night at the state tournament, hitting 94 for the first time in his life.

"He called me last night and said with the way I pitched last night, I could pretty much pick where I wanted to go (for a four-year college) if I just give them a year or two. They've always been good to me, so it's hard to not stay committed to them."

The radar gun at Principal Park was turned off for the state tournament, but a coach from Kansas State had his own gun in the stands and kept track of Lizarraga's performance.

"I heard I hit 94 four times, so I jumped up," he said. "That's definitely nice, especially going into college in a few weeks. It feels good. It's something I've been working on for a long time."

Lizarraga tossed a three-hitter against Davenport North and had impeccable control. He walked only one batter and threw 74 of his 104 pitches for

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strikes. "It was a good one," he acknowledged. "I was on last night."

Lizarraga raised his record to 8-0 with a 0.70 ERA. He has struck out 72 batters in 50 innings, with only 28 hits and nine walks.

If Lizarraga enrolls at Wabash Valley, he'll be eligible for the 2016 Major League draft next June. If he enrolls at an NCAA Division I school like Iowa, Louisville or Kansas State, he won't be eligible for the draft until June of 2018 if he remains at that school.

Lizarraga is well-aware of the Major League rules and wants to play pro baseball. The question now is what path to take. Most Division I schools have already allocated most of their scholarship money for the 2015-16 school year, but Lizarraga is willing to listen if somebody can make an attractive offer.

"It's going to have to be a decent amount of money and it's going to have to be one of the schools I like," he affirmed.

Lizarraga went for a two-mile run Thursday morning and received a routine treatment on his right arm from the Kennedy trainer. That's the normal procedure after he pitches. He said his arm felt "surprisingly" good after throwing so many pitches the night before.

"There's a possibility that I want to pitch again in the state tournament, so I've got to do something to take good care of it," he said.

Zach Daniels, who has signed with the Hawkeyes, is scheduled to be Kennedy's starting pitcher against Iowa City West in the semifinals Friday night. If the Cougars win, they'll play for the Class 4A state title Saturday night against Waukee or Southeast Polk.

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Lizarraga was willing to talk to college coaches on Thursday, but his main focus for the next few days is the state tournament in Des Moines.

"I'm kind of going with the flow right now and trying to win a state championship first," he said.