

Terrell Sykes is Kennedy's little big man

Written by Jim Ecker

Monday, 25 July 2011 22:21 - Last Updated Monday, 25 July 2011 22:32



Terrell Sykes never listened when anyone said he was too small to play baseball.

He didn't listen when he was 4-foot-4, and he doesn't listen now that he's 5-foot-4 and one of the best players for one of the best high school teams in the state.

Sykes is an all-star second baseman for Kennedy High School and one of the reasons the Cougars have a chance to win their second straight Class 4A state title this week.

He's hitting .443 in the leadoff spot for the sixth-ranked Cougars, who will play Fort Dodge in the quarterfinals of the state tournament at Principal Park in Des Moines Wednesday at 6 p.m.

Sykes just smiled when anyone said he was too small. He smiled, then proved them wrong.

"I just went out there and did my thing," he said.

And how tall is he?

"Five-five, I'd say," he replied, smiling. "I'm 5-4 without shoes, 5-5 with shoes."

Kennedy Coach Bret Hoyer has been watching Sykes since he was 9 or 10 years old and playing for the Junior Cougars. Sykes was probably 4-foot nothing at the time.

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Hoyer has been impressed with his little big man for a long time.

"You just had to watch him," Hoyer said. "Watch him move, watch how his hands work, watch how his arm works, watch his footwork. We knew this kid had a chance to be pretty good if he'd stick with it."

Sykes is a stocky guy and doesn't look like an all-star when he walks out of the dugout. Then all he does is beat you, with his glove and his bat and his head.

"For his size, he's got surprising hand strength, he's got surprising quickness," Hoyer said. "Proportionately, he doesn't strike you as a guy who would be very quick, but he is."

"His hands are as good as any middle infielder we've ever had here, and he's got the arm strength to go with it. He's got tremendous anticipation. And then he's just so explosive. He's one of the best second basemen we've ever had."

Kennedy senior Colin Taylor has played with Sykes most of their lives, starting with Junior Cougars and all the way through high school. He remembers a young kid with long corn-rows, braids and beads in his hair - and a kid who could play the game.

"He's been so good," Taylor said. "He's always worked really hard. I've enjoyed watching him play."

Sykes has short-cropped hair now. "The sixth grade is when I cut it all off," he said. "I had it almost to the middle of my back, I think. I had long corn-rows and an Afro."

Sykes cracked Kennedy's starting lineup as a sophomore and has been a mainstay ever since. He's earned the respect of everyone who's ever seen him play.

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He helped Kennedy with the 4A title last year and has made every all-star team that's been announced so far this year. He's been named first team all-Metro, first team all-Mississippi Valley Conference and first team all-district in 4A.

"Now my senior year, I'm actually going out with a bang and getting some nominations and awards," he said modestly. "It feels pretty good."

Sykes has a scholarship to play at Southeastern Community College in West Burlington, where he'll be joined by Kennedy teammates Griffin Michael and David Yancey.

Hoyer moved Sykes into the leadoff spot last year as a junior, about midway through the season. At first, Sykes didn't like it. He preferred hitting further down in the lineup.

"Now doing it I'm completely fine," he said. "I'm ready to start the game, and I'm ready to get on base and score the first run."

Sykes helped ignite Kennedy's offense when he moved into the No.1 spot last year. He's not a typical leadoff hitter who takes pitches, works the count and tries to draw a walk. He comes up swinging with full force.

"I don't know if I should be saying this, but people don't throw off-speed pitches right away," he imparted. "I'm ready to swing. I come up there ready."

"The first pitch of the game is usually a strike, so I want to swing at that first pitch and get a good pitch to hit. Try to hack at it and get on base."

Sykes was not revealing any secrets. He's been an aggressive hitter his entire career and opponents know it, but they haven't found a way to stop him.

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Hoyer called Sykes a spark-plug.

"He wants to send a message," Hoyer remarked. "If you're going to lay it in there, we're going to have at it and we're going to try to do some damage with it, and we want to keep that up all game. That's what I like about him.

"I want an aggressive hitter who's looking for a pitch to drive right away. And that's what he does."

Sykes will be Kennedy's first batter when the Cougars face Fort Dodge Wednesday. The Cougars returned seven starters this season and naturally are thinking about back-to-back state titles.

"We have that in our minds, going for the repeat, but we're starting all over," Sykes said. "We're trying to do the same thing, with the same approach."

It starts with the little man with the big bat and slick glove.