

Hammerin' Hansen an RBI machine

Written by Tom Fruehling
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Muscle-bound Maddie Hansen is one tough cookie, both at the plate and behind it.

While the Jefferson sophomore catcher has been fast racking up extra base hits and runs batted in this season, her defensive skills are just as impressive.

At a crucial point in a critical game Monday against Iowa City West, a runner attempted to score from second on a sharp hit to deep left center. The J-Hawks were nursing a 2-0 lead in a game they had to win to stay alive in the conference championship race.

Center fielder Dani Stomert threw a strike to third baseman Erin Kuba, who whirled and zinged the ball to Hansen at home.

It was a bang-bang play, but the rock-solid catcher stood her ground as the runner tried the barrel past her. She gave up her body to protect the plate.

Hers is a position that gets little notice unless there's a passed ball or a dropped pop foul, but Hansen relishes the role.

"I've been a catcher since I started when I was 8 years old," she says. "I love it. You're able to see the whole field and every play. And you're in on every pitch."

As much as she likes hitting home runs, she gets just as much pleasure on defense.

"Throwing people out on the bases is my favorite part of the game," the strong-armed

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16-year-old backstop points out.

She's thrown 10 this year, a fair feat considering the short base paths and the popularity of speedy courtesy runners.

Moreover, as a starter in both of her varsity seasons, she's made just two errors in 78 games (one each season); this year she has a gaudy .996 fielding average.

Still, the hammerin' Hansen is making her mark mostly as a hitter.

The clean-up batter on a hard-hitting unit, she leads the state with 65 RBIs. Her 19 doubles are the most in Class 5A. With seven home runs, she boasts a hefty slugging percentage of .889. She's walked 19 times and struck out just nine times in 108 at bats with an on base percentage of .575.

Hansen is batting a cool .500.

"I'm having a real good year, way better than last year," she says, although she hit .426 with 41 RBIs as a freshman. "But I worked really hard in the off-season, lifting and working out at Perfect Game or at home. I tried to get in 300 swings a day."

It's not, though, as if she's a Johnny-come-lately among the ranks of young local softball phenoms. Now a member of the premier Baracudas club with other players from the Midwest who will travel the country this summer, she played for years on the elite Cedar Rapids Blue Devils youth teams. Around a dozen girls from those teams are now starring in schools all over the Metro area.

They won two state championships, and the 12-and-under outfit she played on claimed a national title. The World Series that year was held in St. Louis in the middle of summer, and it suited Hansen just fine.

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"It was about 125 degrees," she recalls. "I think we played like seven or nine games in five days.

"I got to catch every game. And it was awesome."

Jefferson's quest for a state tournament berth starts Saturday against Washington in a Class 5A regional semifinal at Larry Niemeyer Field.