

J-Hawks maul No.1 Muskies for state berth

Written by Tom Fruehling

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MUSCATINE - The curse is broken.

After falling the past three years in the regional finals, the Jefferson girls made it back to the state softball tournament in style Tuesday night.

They did it by crushing the top-ranked Class 5A team in the state on Muscatine's home field, no less, with a thoroughly dominating 7-0 shutout of the Muskies.

The 10th-ranked J-Hawks (31-11) will face No.3 Ottumwa (36-6) in the quarterfinals of the state tournament in Fort Dodge on Tuesday at 7:30 p.m.

The mostly unhittable Alyssa Olson once again worked her magic, striking out 13 and baffling a whole lineup of Muskie hitters that came into the game with a team batting average of .409.

The J-Hawks made the most of their eight hits, combined with three Muscatine errors, with runners on base.

And with next week's state tournament on the line, star slugger Maddie Hansen came through with a bat that's been hot all season long.

Hitting .482 and leading Class 5A in runs batted in, the sophomore catcher was 3-for-3 and knocked in two runs.

"We came out fired up," said Hansen, who started last year as a freshman. "We knew we were going to get to state this year."

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In the clutch, she delivered every time. And now the J-Hawks are headed to Fort Dodge.

"The girls not only met, but they exceeded my expectations," said Coach Brian Erbe, a former assistant to legendary coach Larry Niemeyer who returned to take over the team this season after 10 years at Xavier.

"Playing No.1, we told them that good pitching will usually beat good hitting. And obviously, we had great pitching again tonight.

"The girls made some adjustments at the plate that allowed us to hit the ball. We scouted them, and they mostly threw to the outside half of the plate.

"We told the girls to get on top of the plate and hit the outside pitches to the opposite field. And that's what they did."

Hansen got the first hit of the game leading off the bottom of the second (by a coin flip, Jefferson was made the home team) with a hard smash the Muskie third baseman couldn't handle.

Bunted to second by Maddie Koolbeck, courtesy runner Savannah Fowler dashed home on a single to center by Erin Kuba.

With one out in the third inning, Hansen came up with the bases loaded and promptly drilled a run-scoring liner to right.

"I really felt good and felt confident today," she said. "I was waiting for an outside pitch, and when I got it I just drove it to right."

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The timely hit opened the floodgates.

Kaitlyn Davidson scored from third when a rundown went awry, and Amber Grimm followed her home on a passed ball. "We practice aggressive base running," Erbe pointed out.

The J-Hawks padded their 4-0 lead with another run in the fourth on another single to right by Dani Stromert and two more in the fifth on a sharp single to left by Hansen and a bloop into right field by Katelyn Holub.

Meanwhile, the sophomore sensation Olson completely bamboozled the potent Muscatine hitters with her deceptive rising fastball. Batter after batter, time after time, swung six inches underneath her pitches.

After Olson struck out the side in the first inning, the Muskies resorted to laying down three straight bunts to open the second. The first two beat out throws to first by Olson before Hansen nailed the third.

The spunky J-Hawk hurler, however, squelched the rally with two more whiffs.

Muscatine (37-4) also put runners on first and second to open the fifth and sixth innings, but Olson bore down to stifle those threats, as well.

"Alyssa was throwing pretty danged hard tonight," Hansen said. "She was hitting her spots and kept their hitters guessing all night.

"She really brought her 'A' game and threw rockets."

In her first year as a varsity pitcher, Olson is 19-3 with an earned run average barely over a

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measly 1.00. She's struck out 216 batters in 141 innings.

She remains unflappable, though.

"I approached this game like any other game," she said with her usual bag of ice over her right shoulder.

"I just did what I always do, and the ball just went where it wanted to go."

Taking a big lead into the seventh inning, with a state tourney berth but three outs away, Olson circled up her teammates around the middle of the infield.

"I just said to treat it like it 0-0 in the first inning," she explained. "I mostly did it keep myself calm."

Fittingly, she struck out the last batter to end the game.