

No. 4 J-Hawks escape Cedar Falls

Written by Tom Fruehling
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On a senior-dominated Jefferson softball squad, it took two juniors Saturday night for the fourth-ranked team in the state to narrowly escape an upset.

Without a solo home run from Maddie Koolbeck and heads-up baserunning by Amber Grimm, the J-Hawks wouldn't have advanced to Tuesday's Class 5A regional finals, much less kept their dream alive of a state championship.

It was Grimm in the fourth inning who scored what would be the winning run in a 6-5 squeaker over Cedar Falls by smartly tagging up from third base on a high popup behind the plate.

"The catcher was way back close to the screen, and I could see the pitcher was late in covering home," Grimm said. "Nobody was there, so I just went for it."

She slid home safely under the pitcher's high tag.

Jefferson Coach Larry Niemeyer, who took over coaching third base the inning before after starting the game in the dugout, said the decision to dash for home was Grimm's call alone.

"I didn't tell her to go," he said. "But that's the kind of thing we teach."

The swift junior outfielder said she figured the time was right for some aggressive baserunning.

"Cedar Falls had been hitting the ball," she said. "We weren't playing real well, and I knew we needed some runs."

Jefferson (36-5) had defeated Cedar Falls (13-27) by scores of 6-0 and 3-1 in early June, but

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Niemeyer was concerned coming into the game.

“They’ve got a very good team,” he said last week after his own squad took a listless doubleheader from Class 4A Dubuque Wahlert. “If we play them like we played tonight, we won’t win.”

He was close to being right.

The first inning proved to be an omen of what the J-Hawks were up against and how they would eventually prevail.

The Tigers loaded the bases on two walks and a mishandled bunt by Jefferson pitcher Hannah Petersen for one of three uncharacteristic team errors in the game. But the strong-armed southpaw ended up striking out the side, recording the first three of her 11 strikeouts to go along with six walks.

Those three stranded runners were the first of 11 Cedar Falls left in the game.

For much of the night, Petersen kept getting into trouble but more often than not bailed herself out with clutch strikeouts. Meanwhile, the J-Hawks struck for three quick scores in the bottom of the first on RBI singles to center by Maddie Hansen, Kenna Fry and Petersen.

They added another run in the third on a single to right by Fry after the Tigers once again left the bases full in the top of the inning without scoring.

Petersen, who has been suffering from a sinus infection, saw her luck run out in the next inning as the Tigers jumped on her for four runs to tie the game. They parlayed two walks, four singles and an error into runs, only to have their rally stalled when a runner was thrown out trying to steal.

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Koolbeck quickly put Jefferson back in front with a long homer over the left centerfield fence to lead off the fourth inning. She was in the lineup in place of senior star Rachel Sedlacek, who missed the game to take part in her sister's wedding in Chicago.

Grimm followed the solo shot with a sharp single to center. She was on third with the bases loaded after a single by Carson Burgart when Hansen lifted the sky-high foul ball near the backstop.

"I hadn't planned on running," she explained. "But I heard their coach yelling for somebody to cover and just took off."

When the Tigers put up a last-gasp run in the sixth on a Jefferson throwing error and a hit, Grimm's smart move proved to be the game-winner. Buckling down as she did all night, Petersen struck out two of three batters in the seventh to preserve the narrow victory.

As was the case after the Wahlert games, Niemeyer was displeased with his team's effort.

"About the only good thing I can say about it is that we won," he remarked. "I didn't have to say much to the girls. We just didn't play with any enthusiasm, any spark.

"We had a very good practice in the morning. They were sharp and crisp. But, for some reason, they came out tonight totally flat."

Jefferson will host No. 10 Davenport West (30-10) in the regional finals Tuesday at 7 p.m., with the winner advancing to the Class 5A state tournament in Fort Dodge. Davenport West defeated Davenport Central, 10-0, in five innings Saturday.

"I hope we're ready to play," Niemeyer said.

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In his 52-year basketball and softball coaching career, he's been in nearly a dozen state championship games. But he said there's nothing tougher than a regional final.

"That's the one you need to get to state," he said.