

Prairie stuns No.4 PV for trip to state

Written by Jim Ecker

Tuesday, 16 July 2013 23:36 - Last Updated Wednesday, 17 July 2013 09:41

BETTENDORF - Joe Yegge made a bold promise to the members of the Cedar Rapids Prairie softball team when he became their new head coach.

"I told them when I took the job in the fall, if they did everything we asked, I promised them we'd get to state," Yegge said with a slightly mischievous smile.

It came true Tuesday night.

The Prairie Hawks shocked No.4 Pleasant Valley, 3-2, in the regional finals in Bettendorf and claimed their first trip to the state tournament.

Prairie (28-14) will face No.2 Ankeny (32-10) in the quarterfinals of the Class 5A state tournament in Fort Dodge on Tuesday at 5 p.m.

Prairie won only eight games last season, so promising a trip to the state tournament in his first year as head coach took the players by surprise.

"Crazy, right? I know," said senior Katie Kuch, the winning pitcher who tamed the potent Pleasant Valley bats.

Crazy like a fox.

"We had nothing to lose," said Kuch. "He told us to come in and work hard, and that's what we did. And we shocked people."

Yegge led Kirkwood to the national tournament this year with a 50-game winning streak and

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the No.2 ranking in the nation. Once he got done with the Eagles this season, he drove down Kirkwood Boulevard and worked his magic at Prairie.

"To believe that it happened, it's just amazing that they bought into it and did it," Yegge said, beaming. "To be honest, I'm shocked."

Prairie grabbed a 3-0 lead in the third inning and forced Pleasant Valley (30-11) to change pitchers, and it stayed 3-0 until the dramatic top of the seventh inning.

The Spartans began the final inning with back-to-back singles, bringing Pleasant Valley slugger Chloe Miller to the plate as the tying run. Miller, who has signed with Wisconsin, ranks second in the state with 18 homers, but Kuch pitched Miller carefully and got her to strike out on a pitch that was low and away.

"She's a great player, a great hitter," said Kuch. "I tried to keep it off the plate and not give her anything good to hit."

Kuch retired Holly Hoelting, another slugger with 14 homers, on an infield fly, but the Hawks were not out of trouble yet. Haley Duwa lined a single to left field and two runs scored when the ball got past Prairie left fielder Halle Lueck.

Duwa made it to second base as the tying run with two outs.

The Pleasant Valley fans who filled the bleachers and lined their side of the field were yelling and screaming, anticipating a big hit to tie the game, or perhaps a homer to put the Spartans ahead.

"Oh my gosh. It's nerve-racking," said Prairie catcher Aly O'Brian. "But I have all the confidence in the world in Katie. I just knew we were going to get that last out."

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Erica Miller lofted a fly ball down the left-field line. When it left the bat, it looked like it might fall for a base hit, but Lueck had other ideas.

"I saw the ball and I knew this was it and I needed to get this last out to redeem myself," said Lueck. "I knew I had to give it my all to get that ball."

The ball nestled safely in her glove and the celebration began.

"I knew we were going to get that last out. I just knew it," said Kuch, who had a determined look all night until it was finally replaced by a big smile.

Lueck made a sensational play in the sixth inning to protect a 3-0 lead and save the day. Pleasant Valley had two runners on base when Tristen Miller lofted a high fly ball to deep left field that seemed to keep carrying on a still night.

Lueck raced back as far as she could and snared the ball at the top of fence for the second out. It was a terrific catch and probably robbed Miller of a three-run homer.

"It was just over the fence," Lueck reported. "I just reached. My back was against the fence and I caught it."

The Hawks breathed a sigh of relief.

"When I saw Halle at the fence I got a little nervous, but she made a great catch. Phenomenal," said Kuch.

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"That was awesome," Yegge agreed.

Prairie played air-tight defense all night, except for Lueck's miscue in the seventh inning. Shortstop Mallory Jones made a sensational diving stop on a hard-hit ground ball and flipped to second baseman Amanda Stecklein for a force play in the sixth inning for a key out.

Meanwhile, Kuch (21-7) kept throwing strikes. Pleasant Valley collected eight hits, but she kept the ball down and relied on her defense to make plays. Kuch struck out only three batters, none bigger than fanning Chloe Miller in the seventh inning.

Yegge visited the mound in the top of the seventh after the Spartans put runners at first and second with nobody out. Pleasant Valley had the heart of its batting order coming up and Yegge needed to break the tension and give Kuch a chance to breathe.

Yegge made Kuch smile and laugh, then walked slowly back to the dugout.

"He said, 'You deserve this, You deserve this,'" Kuch related.

"She's had a great year," said Yegge. "She's worked her tail off. She deserved it.

"Go get it," he told her. "You're a senior and go get it."

Pleasant Valley leads the state with 58 home runs and ranks second in RBIs and batting average (a lusty .428), but Kuch made them look ordinary.

By contrast, Prairie hit a grand total of eight home runs this season, but the statistics did not matter Tuesday night in Bettendorf.

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"Going to Fort Dodge is absolutely incredible," said Kuch. "It's amazing. It's been a great season. I can't believe it."

Yegge's bold promise came true.

"We trusted him and we trusted the decisions he made," said Kuch. "This team has become a family. It's a big part of what's made us successful on the field."

"It's an awesome feeling," said Yegge. "I'm so proud of the girls. They bought into everything we did. They trusted what we were doing. I can't be happier for them."

Jones began Prairie's three-run outburst in the third inning with a one-out walk. Brittney Lash singled to center, Gabi Carter had an RBI single to left and Natalie Rumer drilled a long RBI single to right field.

Another run scored on a wild pitch, one of three wild pitches in the inning by starting pitcher Lexi Spelhaug and relief pitcher Ashley Yattoni.

Prairie will be making the first trip to the state tournament in school history.

Prairie will be the only unranked team in the eight-team tournament this year.

The other first-round pairings are No.7 Dubuque Senior vs. No.6 Dowling Catholic, No.8 West Des Moines Valley vs. No.5 Johnston, and No.10 Cedar Rapids Jefferson vs. No.3 Ottumwa.

Prairie will play Dubuque Senior or Dowling in the second round, either in the semifinals on

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Thursday or in a consolation game on Wednesday.

PLEASANT VALLEY (2): Dwyer, ss, 4 1 2 0, Reynolds, dp/2b, 3 1 2 0, C.Miller, 3b, 2 0 0 0, Hoelting, 1b, 4 0 0 0, Duwa, 2b/1b, 4 0 2 1, Nelson, pr, 0 0 0 0, E.Miller, rf, 4 0 1 0, Smith, c, 1 0 0 0, Kelling, lf, 1 0 1 0, Zaruba, ph/lf, 2 0 0 0, Meyer, cf, 3 0 0 0, Spelhaug, p, 0 0 0 0, Yattoni, p, 0 0 0 0. Totals 28 2 8 1.

PRAIRIE (3): Jones, ss, 2 1 0 0, Lash, cf, 3 1 1 0, Carter, 3b, 3 1 1 1, Rumer, dp, 2 0 2 1, Usher, rf, 2 0 0 0, L.Kuch, pr, 0 0 0 0, Thumann, pr, 0 0 0 0, Gudenkauf, 1b, 2 0 0 0, O'Brian, c, 3 0 0 0, Stecklein, 2b, 2 0 0 0, Lueck, lf, 2 0 1 0, K.Kuch, p, 0 0 0 0. Totals 21 3 5 2.

Pleasant Valley 000 000 2 - 2 8 0

Prairie 003 000 x - 3 5 1

Spelhaug, Yattoni (3) and Smith. K.Kuch and O'Brian. W - K.Kuch. L - Spelhaug. 2b - E.Miller. SB - Thumann.