

## Prairie girls trimmed by No. 7 Spartans

Written by Tom Fruehling

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There's a world of difference between losing a game and getting beat.

The scrappy Prairie softball girls were beaten in a Class 5A regional semifinal by No. 7 Pleasant Valley, 9-8, Monday night, but in no way could they be called losers.

In a heart-breaking end to their season, they went from leading by three runs to trailing by five and coming back to tie.

Then, as they'd done all night, the visiting Spartans from Bettendorf scored after two outs in their half of the seventh inning.

A gangly eighth grade relief pitcher for Pleasant Valley who had been battered by Prairie hitters the previous two innings calmly mowed down the Hawks in order to close out the roller-coaster contest.

"That's what happens when you have two teams that are pretty equal," noted Prairie senior catcher Natalie Rumer. "They got the crucial hits at the end, and that decided the game. It could have gone either way."

Filling in for head coach Joe Yegge, who was in Canada at an international softball tournament, Hawk assistant Lynnette Stecklein noted the obvious that there were two disastrous innings when Pleasant Valley tallied four runs in each.

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And for a team with left-handed slap hitters up and down the lineup, Pleasant Valley won it with power. With two gone in the third inning, Spartan sluggers Sydney Dwyer and Hailey Duwa hit back-to-back home runs to put their team ahead 4-3.

And in the next frame, again with two outs, Pleasant Valley strung together two doubles and two singles for another four runs.

"We knew they had good hitters and could score some runs," Stecklein said. "Tonight, the long ball hurt us."

The night started with unranked Prairie (25-14) leading 2-0 in the second inning of a game suspended by rain Saturday night. Picking up where they left off two days before, the Hawks scored again when Gabi Carter knocked in Halle Lueck.

"We socked the ball right from the start," said Lueck.

And, added Rumer, "We hit well the entire game."

Over the next two innings, however, Pleasant Valley (29-8) showed why it ranks No.7 in Class 5A by rocking Hawk freshman pitcher Natalie Halvorson for eight runs on eight hits.

"She's been a rock for us all year," said Stecklein. "We stuck with her. And I'm really proud of her. She came through after those two bad innings."

Halvorson did allow two weak hits, but one runner was erased trying to steal third and another on a double play. The Hawks, meanwhile, battled back from the 8-3 deficit.

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Senior Amanda Stecklein opened the fourth with a single and came all the way home on a double to right-center Taylor Moenk. Rumer homered to deep center to begin the fifth, and Stecklein delivered again with a run-scoring double.

“We fought the whole game,” said Stecklein, the daughter of the assistant coach. “We came up a little short, but we didn’t give up.”

Indeed, they knotted the game in the sixth when Rumer once more brought in a run on a hard shot to the fence in left and freshman Lauren Kuch brought her in on a clutch infield hit.

“These girls could have rolled over and died,” said Coach Stecklein. “But they’ve got a lot of Hawk Pride. They gave it everything they had.”

In the end, it was not quite enough.

After the spunky Halvorson retired big hitters Dwyer and Duwa to open the seventh, she gave up a sharp single to Tristen Zaruba and a run-scoring double to Erica Miller. The Hawks then went down in order.

“We still had a great season,” said Rumer. “All year, we put faith in our teammates and played together like a family. We couldn’t ask for a better team.”