



Tumwater Wins District Title

By Ben Zimmerman

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CENTRALIA ---- The lesson illustrated by Tumwater's 2-1 victory over Kelso in the Southwest Washington 3A District fastpitch championship game at Recreation Park here Friday was nothing the Lassies didn't already know.

Just a well-timed reminder that now is the wrong time of year for mistakes.

Even one.

"Better to lose now than at state," said Kelso senior Carri O'Neil, brushing a tear off her cheek and laughing. "It's tough to lose a pitcher's duel. It stings. But it wasn't our last game."

Tumwater scored two unearned runs on a throwing error in the top of the sixth inning, tipping the scales in favor of its ace pitcher, senior Lindsey Vander Lugt, and spoiling a gem by Kelso's ace, O'Neil.

The T-Birds (20-1) will play the No. 3 seed from District III in Game 5 of the Class 3A state tournament at the South End Recreational Area in Tacoma next Friday.

The Lassies (16-2) face the District II No. 3 seed in Game 1. The silver lining, O'Neil noted, is that state is a clean slate. Sure, Tumwater enters the tourney on a 20-game winning streak, while Kelso limps in after a heartbreaker.

But like the 14 other squads in the state field, they're both 0-0.

"We went as a No. 4 (seed) last year and we ended up beating a No. 1," O'Neil said. "Maybe going as a No. 2 will be good for us."

Kelso led 1-0 and was six outs from a district championship before unravelling in the top of the sixth. Erica Early bunted O'Neil's first pitch of the inning back to the mound, but the ball took a funky, sideways hop that caught O'Neil off guard, allowing Early to scamper to first.

The tournament scorekeeper ruled it a hit.

Ashley Andrews hit a towering fly ball to center on the next pitch. The ball carried ---- maybe Willie Mays tracks it down at the Polo Grounds ---- and scrambling center fielder Anna Owen was unable to get underneath. Early got a late jump from first and was almost overtaken at second base by Andrews, who was thinking double all the way.

Owen retrieved the ball from the base of the wall and fired a throw toward home, missing two cut-offs but finding O'Neil, who was standing in the pitcher's circle.

O'Neil whipped a throw toward third, trying to nab Early, and watched helplessly as her throw sailed into left. Early scored and Andrews, never breaking stride, scored easily behind her. "I go all year without making an error," O'Neil said, shaking her head. "Hope I got that out of my system."

The Lassies managed only one baserunner in the last two innings, a one-out, bloop single to right by Ashlea Strode in the bottom of the sixth. Vander Lugt needed 18 pitches to record the last five outs.

"I knew we'd score eventually," said Vander Lugt. "We usually have one inning where we score a few. We never give up."

That sense of certainty helped Vander Lugt stay focused in the early innings of the title game. The powerful left-hander had retired the last 17 batters she faced in a 1-0 victory over Columbia River in the district semifinals on Thursday, Vander Lugt's 14th shutout of the season. But Strode walloped a triple in Kelso's first at-bat against the T-Bird southpaw, and scored on Owen's infield single one out later.

"That was a shock," said Vander Lugt. "It gave me more incentive to try even harder. Definitely a wake-up call."

Vander Lugt fired back-to-back strikeouts to end the first inning and retired the next nine Kelso batters before O'Neil reached on an error in the fourth. Vander Lugt struck out the next Lassie she faced, and catcher Jessica Dubois picked off courtesy runner Kadi Stearns to end the inning.

Vander Lugt finished with 10 strikeouts and no walks.

"She's one of the best pitchers in the state," said O'Neil. "One of, if not the, best."

O'Neil is a member of that sorority, too. She had four strikeouts and scattered three hits, battling Vander Lugt in a pitching duel that showed why five of the past six 3A state fastpitch champions have come from District IV.

Said Vander Lugt: "It will be hard to beat this (pitching matchup) at state."

Tumwater's sophomore shortstop, Ashley Andrews, stalked the left side of the infield like a safari predator, robbing the Lassies of several hits while tallying four assists and two putouts. Vander Lugt called her "the key player to this game."

Kelso senior second baseman Roni Brekke was equally impressive. She stole a single from Vander Lugt with a diving stop in the fourth inning and vacuumed every other

grounder in her vicinity.

"We played great defense, except for that one play," said Kelso coach Mike McMahon, referring to the chain of mistakes on **Andrews' sixth-inning double**. "I thought it might come down to one play, like a close call at first or a dropped third strike, but not like that. At this level, one mistake ... you can't make mistakes. One goof-up."

McMahon shrugged.

"We'll learn from it," he said.