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Ruppel, five teammates garner first-team honors for baseball champion CG-B; OHS has four on 2nd team

Making school history is hard enough to do once.

But a senior-laden Cedar Grove-Belgium baseball team was up for the challenge a second time this season.

The Rockets successfully defended the Central Lakeshore Conference co-championship they won last year, this time securing an outright crown. It's the second conference title they've won in 31 years and the first time in school history they've repeated.

After winning their first WIAA playoff game in 27 years in 2011, the Rockets won their second playoff contest in the last 28 years this season.

Six Cedar Grove-Belgium players were awarded All-CLC first-team honors. Leading the way was pitching ace Josh Ruppel, who repeated as a unanimous selection in the coaches' voting.

Ruppel, a senior right-hander, had an 8-1 record and a microscopic 0.76 earned-run average in league games, improving on last year's 0.88 mark. In 61 innings, he allowed only 19 hits and had 101 strikeouts and 18 walks.

Ruppel threw three shutouts, including a one-hitter, and wasn't charged with an error.

At the plate, Ruppel hit .451 with 14 RBI.

Other Cedar Grove-Belgium players named to the first team were infielders Luke Kaat and T.J. Obbink, outfielders Christian O'Donnell and Kyle Kirst and utility player Spencer Bares. All are seniors except for O'Donnell, a junior.

Four Ozaukee players were named to the all-league second team: pitcher Pat Kroening, infielder Owen Miller, outfielder Devon Linzenmeyer and utility player Jeremy Wichmann.

Kaat, who also pitched, hit .460 and drove in 19 runs. He had an .889 fielding average.

As a pitcher, Kaat was 4-0 with a 3.16 ERA in 31 innings. He struck out 34 and walked seven.

Obbink, a shortstop, hit .382 with seven RBI, scored 22 runs and drew 15 walks. His fielding percentage was .857.

O'Donnell didn't commit an error. He hit .377 with seven RBI, 10 walks and seven runs.

Kirst hit .453, had 14 RBI and scored 12 runs. He also wasn't charged with an error.

Bares batted .397 and drove in 16 runs. He had a .909 fielding average.

Cedar Grove-Belgium coach Mike Ruppel was impressed with his team's focus, especially late in the season. After fading down the stretch last year and having to share the CLC title with Sheboygan Lutheran/Kohler, the Rockets turned it on this summer and won their last four league games.

They finished 13-5 in conference and were 15-8 overall.

"I thought we played with more energy and enthusiasm toward the end of the year than the previous year," the coach said.

The Rockets ended their season with a 9-0 loss to state qualifier Sheboygan Falls, struggling defensively.

"We need to clean up the number of errors for next year to help our pitchers out," coach Ruppel said.

"We will be a young team with only two seniors, but with the right chemistry and work in the off-season we should be competitive."

Although Ozaukee was shut out in the first-team voting, it had no shortage of second-team representation. The Warriors were led by a pair of freshman standouts, Miller and Wichmann, on their way to fifth place in the conference with a 9-9 record.

"We had some good senior leadership, and I was really impressed with the way our young players performed," Ozaukee coach Bob Kiefer said.

Miller, a shortstop/pitcher, led the Warriors in most offensive categories, including a .466 batting average that was the league's second-best mark.

Miller had a .621 slugging average with 27 hits that included two doubles, two triples and a

home run. He scored 21 runs, drove in 19, drew nine walks and struck out only three times in 58 at-bats.

He had a .544 on-base percentage as the No. 3 hitter in Ozaukee's lineup.

"Owen never seemed to let anything bother him," Kiefer said. "He led us in hitting and always found a way to make something good happen."

Miller's sharp batting eye and smooth swing allowed him to hang tough in the box, often getting hits on two-strike counts, Kiefer noted.

Miller also contributed as a pitcher. He had a 2-4 record and 4.90 ERA in 40 innings of work, striking out 40 and walking 14.

"He threw a lot of innings and did a great job early before wearing down a little late in the season," Kiefer said. "He pitched aggressively."

Wichmann, a third baseman/pitcher, excelled as the Warriors' cleanup hitter. He was second on the team with a .400 batting average, had 15 RBI and scored 14 runs.

With a .564 slugging average, Wichmann had 22 hits, including seven doubles and one triple. He walked 15 times and had a .492 on-base percentage.

"The impressive thing for me was the seven doubles," Kiefer said. "Jeremy is a big kid for a freshman (6-foot-2, 200 pounds) and he has great hand-eye coordination."

As a pitcher, Wichmann posted a 2-0 conference record with a 2.47 ERA. In 17 innings, he struck out 19 and walked 10.

"I've been coaching baseball for 35 years, and I've never seen two freshmen who have handled themselves this well at the varsity level," Kiefer said of Wichmann and Miller.

Kroening, a senior right-hander, earned a second-team nod despite missing three pitching starts because of an arm injury. Even so, he was the Warriors' No. 1 starter.

Kroening went 3-3 in CLC play and had a 3.76 ERA and 38 strikeouts in 31-2/3 innings of work.

"When he was healthy, Pat's fastball was as good as just about anyone in the conference," Kiefer said. "He worked hard on developing a better curveball."

Linzenmeyer, a senior, was probably the league's most improved player. After hitting just .093 as a junior, he batted .317 in conference games this year.

"I've never seen anybody do that kind of turnaround in one year," Kiefer said. "Last year, he got eaten up by pitches he hadn't seen, but we changed his approach a little bit and it paid off."

Linzenmeyer had 19 hits, including two doubles and two triples, and drove in nine runs. He had a .416 slugging average and was 9-for-11 on steal attempts.

Ozaukee was represented on the honorable-mention list by Doug Grimm, a senior outfielder.

Grimm hit .273 and had a .448 on-base percentage. He scored 13 runs, drove in six and walked 12 times in 58 at-bats.

Grimm led the Warriors with 11 steals in as many attempts.

“Doug was so steady in the outfield for us and did a great job,” Kiefer said.

Image Information: AMONG THE SIX Cedar Grove-Belgium players who received All-Central Lakeshore Conference first-team honors this season were pitcher Josh Ruppel (left) and infielder T.J. Obbink (right). Photos by Sam Arendt