

Experience, confidence help Lux, Hansen lead St. Mary's to a... Breakout Year

Jake Calhoun

SLEEPY EYE - "Experienced" is the word that most-commonly surfaces when the Sleepy Eye St. Mary's softball team comes into conversation.

St. Mary's partook in countless dogfights at Caswell Park in Section 2A leading up to this year and rightfully paid its dues as a result. This time, St. Mary's got its turn to be top dog.

This season, a sound core of experienced upperclassmen led St. Mary's to a third-place finish at the Class A state tournament in the school's first state appearance in 10 years. Among those upperclassmen were senior pitcher Anna Lux and junior shortstop Jody Hansen, both of whom were two-year starters heading into this season.

Lux and Hansen both had outstanding seasons and numerous accolades, which was more than enough for them to be named All-Journal Co-Players of the Year in softball, as voted on by the sports staff of The Journal.

"Last year, we basically were the same team as this year - we had one senior and played the whole summer together," Lux said. "Going into this season, we had more experience as a team together - we knew each other very well, we were close friends and we were a core group of girls who knew the game inside and out."

Junior catcher Ali Beltz, who finished third overall in All-Journal voting, also received a first-place vote and deserves immense recognition for her role in the Knights' success this season as well.

Lux was the nucleus of the team as the pitcher. In earning the title of Tomahawk Conference Player of the Year, among other accolades, Lux went 21-3 in the circle with 137 strikeouts and a 1.92 ERA in 120 1/3 innings pitched. At the plate, she batted .438 with 39 hits (including eight extra-base hits) with 23 RBIs and 25 runs scored.

Hansen was the team's leadoff batter in years' past due to her reputation as a fearless speedster. Hansen batted third this season, leading the team with eight home runs and 32 stolen bases in batting .510 with 42 RBIs, 64 runs scored on 49 hits, 21 for extra bases.

For Hansen, who has been a starter on the St. Mary's volleyball, girls' basketball and softball teams since she was a freshman, juggling all three sports and excelling in all of them is no easy task. But having played softball since before she can remember and growing up in the baseball-crazy town of Sleepy Eye, it is no surprise that softball is extra-special to her.

Because of that, Hansen has always played like an upperclassmen even two years ago in her first year as a starter on varsity.

"Growing up watching and playing my whole life has definitely shaped me into a better player," Hansen said. "It's helped me grow through different situations and see different obstacles to overcome during games."

As a freshman, Hansen batted .535 with 46 hits and 25 stolen bases. Last year as a sophomore, she batted .527 with a team-high 48 hits, 34 RBIs and 27 stolen bases.

Lux and the St. Mary's defense complemented each other nicely this season, allowing 0.38 runs per inning with opposing batters hitting .166 against her while she was pitching. Lux had always been consistent in the circle, but this year she was able to display true dominance.

"Having a defense behind her brought her a lot of confidence knowing that she didn't have to strike everyone out and knowing that she just had to do her job and throw strikes and that we were behind her to make plays for her

and do stuff for her," Hansen said. "It really brought her up, which was good."

At the state tournament, No. 3-seeded St. Mary's advanced to the state semifinals after beating Pillager 7-1 in the afternoon's quarterfinals on June 8. That evening, however, the semifinal game between St. Mary's and No. 2-seeded New York Mills did not begin until almost 2 hours after it was supposed to because of an extra-inning game that backed things up at Caswell Park.

The teams were tied 6-6 until the bottom of the sixth inning, when New York Mills scored an unearned run for what turned out to be the decider. New York Mills went on to win the Class A state title the next day, but St. Mary's did not let its late-night letdown affect it.

"If circumstances were different, I mean if we would've played on time - there were so many things that didn't go the way that we would've liked them to," Lux said. "It could've gone either way Thursday night. We knew that it was going to be a late night, but we knew that 6 hours later we needed to be back in Sleepy Eye, get on the bus and win the third-place game.

"Only three teams end their season on a win, so we went out with a bang."

St. Mary's tacked on nine runs on nine hits in the first inning of that third-place game against Hayfield en route to winning 15-2 in five innings. Lux got the win in her final high school game and Hansen went 4 for 4 with four RBIs and three runs scored.

Next year will be Hansen's last chance to get some more hardware, but Lux won't be back and has left some big shoes to fill.

"We're definitely going to miss her pitching and especially her hitting too," Hansen said. "She was a great leader, player - anything on the field. You needed help with anything, she was there. We're all going to miss her a lot."

Hansen said she has aspirations of playing softball in college and with her senior year coming up, she will have some tough choices ahead of her.

But as for Lux, she's hanging it up for good as a player. She wants to focus on her studies at South Dakota State University and said she would like to get into coaching after she graduates.

As a three-sport athlete who had numerous athletic obligations in the offseason, this summer is a new experience for Lux.

"This is my first summer where I have no sports," Lux said. "I have a little softball umping here and there but looking at how my past summers have been, it's insane how much I dedicated to my teams and the sports and getting to know all these girls who are my really good friends.

"It takes a lot of time but in the end, the success that I've had with all three of the teams that I've played on, nothing beats it. It's just one thing in your life that you can't let pass."