

Huiras' mound-monster season leads Sleepy Eye

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SLEEPY EYE - Sleepy Eye High School's Jackson Huiras was confident that his senior year of baseball would be his best year yet.

He was confident even before his first game of the season against Sleepy Eye St. Mary's, which ended with Huiras throwing a five-inning no-hitter. That game also saw Huiras strike out 12.

And that confidence Huiras had was contagious.

"Right at the beginning of the season/first week of practice, I was really confident with our team," Huiras said. "Same with our coach Aaron Nesvold, he was very confident with us in our ability to go deep into playoffs because we had a lot of speed, and we had a lot of guys that wanted to play.

"Every single guy, whether they were on or off the field, they wanted to play ball and they were confident in each other and trusted one another."

Huiras' season-opening no-hitter was the first game of a doubleheader, and the Knights ended up returning the favor by throwing a combined no-hitter in the second game. That didn't take away from Huiras' special moment, the first no-no of his prep career.

But it did reveal an early glimpse of how tough Tomahawk Conference teams would be this year.

After Sleepy Eye defeated Gibbon-Fairfax-Winthrop and Mankato Loyola in the Section 2A playoffs, the Indians fell to New Ulm Cathedral by a score of 11-10 and dropped to the elimination bracket.

There, Sleepy Eye knocked off Springfield 7-1 to advance to the elimination bracket semifinals against St. Mary's. St. Mary's then got a 3-0 win to eliminate the Indians from the tournament.

Huiras, not one to take credit without giving credit to his teammates and coaches, was one big reason for the Indians' deep playoff run this season.

He finished the year with a .400 batting average and led the team in hits (28), doubles (8), triples (4) and runs scored (27). He also had 19 RBIs and swiped 16 bases.

But on the mound is where Huiras shined, allowing just two earned runs all season for a .27 ERA in 52 2/3 innings. He also struck out 91 batters.

Huiras' standout senior year saw him named the 2022 All-Journal Baseball Player of the Year as voted on by The Journal's sports staff.

Huiras also finished the season as Tomahawk Conference Co-Player of the Year with Cathedral's Sam Knowles and was an All-Section player.

"I just feel honored to receive these awards and be a part of it," Huiras said. "I know my mom and dad have always helped me and pushed me to be the best I can be, so they've been there for me day in and day out. I don't think they've missed a single high school game, they'd always find replacements for work or find somebody to do something for them. And it was a memorable season, I don't think I'll be able to forget it for a while. It's going to be hard to watch next year when I come and not be a part of it, but it should be fun.

"Aaron Nesvold was the guy that has been with me since my freshman year. Stepping on the varsity field, he's always had trust in me and confidence and just watched me grow as a player. It's going to be something I miss for sure."

Another honor Huiras received recently was a selection to the Play Ball MN! All-Star Series in Chaska, which occurred this past weekend. Huiras played with the South team, finishing with a win in the fifth-place game.

"The All-Star Series, first I felt honored to be a part of it," Huiras said. "Secondly, when I was there, it was a blast. Sam Knowles and I drove together to the All-Star Series and we basically hung out most of the time, then we met other players like Jaden Drill (New Ulm), Jake Schmidt (Sibley East) and other kids from Mankato West and all over. It was a variety of players as well, like Class A to 4A. So it was really good competition and we also got to build a bond with each other that, honestly, I thought I'd never build a bond with some of those guys, so it felt really good."

Huiras was no slouch last season, finishing his junior year as a Tomahawk Conference player. He had a 1.50 ERA, 44 strikeouts and six walks allowed in 42 innings on the mound and also hit .348 at the plate.

But this season saw him take a big leap forward, especially on the mound.

After losing the 2020 season due to COVID, Huiras said he and many other players were set back with a year less varsity experience. But Huiras took the 2020 shutdown as an opportunity to get into the weight room more.

He also improved by spending time at different facilities, one main facility being the 507 Baseball Academy in St. Peter. Huiras also complimented his team's coaching staff and the addition of assistant coach Chase Meyer, a 2014 New Ulm High School grad.

Huiras also said the trust he put in his catcher Caden Evers this year, along with improved accuracy, helped lead him to his strong senior season.

"My catcher, Caden Evers, I don't think I shook him off on a pitch once this year," Huiras said. "I trusted every single thing he did and called. He called my location, he called everything. With that said, another big part of it that helped was my accuracy and location. I was able to locate every ball that Evers told me to throw, missed here and there, but overall I was effective on the mound. And coach Nesvold did a good job of letting me get my rest days, usually a week's rest, then go again."

Huiras will play Division III college baseball for head coach Ryan Kragh and the Bethany Lutheran College Vikings next season. He plans to study accounting.

