

No. 1 vs. No. 2 for the state baseball title

Knappa tries to repeat as champion

By GARY HENLEY
The Daily Astorian

The Burns Hilanders have the higher ranking, while Knappa has the better record, and the Loggers also own the "defending state champions" label.

It will all be up for grabs Friday (1:30 p.m.) at Volcanoes Stadium in Keizer in one of only two championship games this weekend involving the No. 1 vs. the No. 2 seeds.

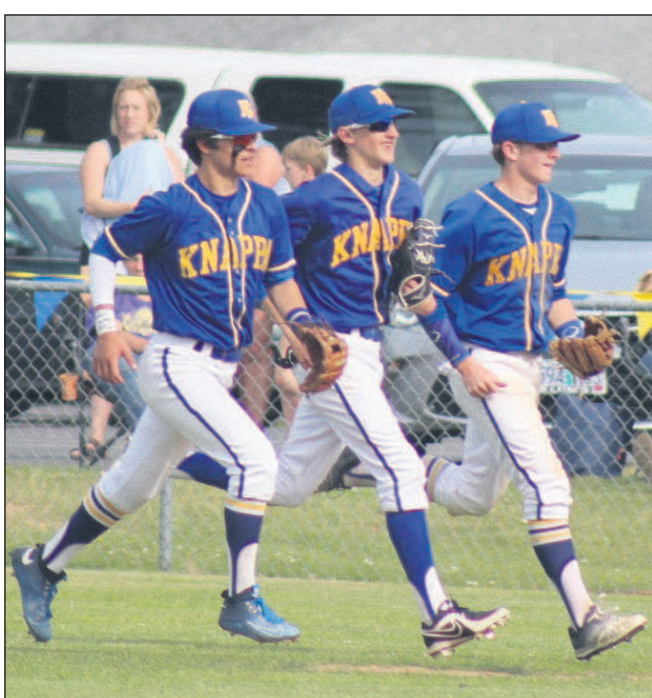
It's the second straight year the 2A/1A state title game has come down to the top two ranked teams.

You don't need to remind Knappa fans about the 2015 final, when the Loggers came in as the No. 2 seed against No. 1 seed Monroe. We all know how that one turned out, with Knappa winning 3-0 to finish a perfect 27-0 season.

The Loggers could be facing their toughest challenge of the 2016 season Friday, and vice versa for the Hilanders.

"We'll go see what we can do," said Knappa coach Jeff Miller, who is taking his third team to the state championship, after appearances — and wins — in 2010 and 2015. "All we know is that we're playing."

Neither team has traveled much over the last month. The last road game for Burns was May 10 (at Weston-McE-



From left to right, Knappa's Reuben Cruz, Andrew Bryant and Noah Kinney head off the field after an inning-ending catch by Bryant in foul territory.

wen), while Knappa's last trip away from home (other than a playoff at CMH Field) was May 13 at Vernonia.

Miller and the Loggers always enjoy a good road contest. Especially in a place where they're 2-0.

"I think we travel well," Miller said. "It's going to be warm (near 90 degrees), but it's going to be warm for everybody. No. 1 vs. No. 2, sunny day, a nice stadium ... it's what a championship game should be. It should be a great experience for our young guys, and a great way to cap it off for our one elder statesman (Noah Kinney, the lone senior)."

Kinney had a key hit in Tuesday's win over Monroe,

when the Dragons chose to intentionally walk Reuben Cruz to pitch to Kinney with the bases loaded.

Kinney came through with a two-run single that tied the game, 3-3. "Obviously they're going to walk Reuben there, and I think Noah relished that role," Miller said. "And boy did he come through. Big hit there."

No early deficit
One thing Miller is hoping NOT to see is an early deficit. Knappa has fallen behind by at least a 3-0 score in each of its three playoff games.

If you do that against Burns, you're playing with

SCOREBOARD

PREP SCHEDULE

Baseball — Class 2A/1A State Championship: Knappa Loggers vs. Burns Hilanders, 1:30 p.m., Volcanoes Stadium, Keizer (game will be broadcast on OSAA.com).

fire. It could quickly get out of hand against the Hilanders, who have scored in double figures in 16 of their 24 wins, including a string of eight straight with 10-plus runs.

Even though no one rallies like the Loggers, Knappa does not want to give up early runs in this one.

"Obviously we can't do that against a quality team like Burns," Miller said. "It's a state championship game, and we'll have to play a little cleaner."

In Tuesday's win, Miller said, "again, our kids showed no panic whatsoever. They've been there and done that. They don't feel good about giving up three in the first, but at the same time, they're confident they're going to come back."

The likely scenario for Friday — neither team will be scoring in double figures.

Especially the Hilanders. Since a 9-6 loss at Nestucca April 29, the Loggers have only allowed 15 total runs in their last nine games. Only twice in 25 games has any team scored over four runs on Knappa.

"If we hold them to three (runs), we've done well," Miller said. "They swing the bats well. They're going to pitch. They're going to hit. They're going to field.

They're No. 1 for a reason."

Pitching plan

On the mound, Miller was busy Wednesday putting a plan together on who will pitch for the Loggers.

Michal Goodman has started all three playoff games, and has held all three teams in check, enough to keep the Loggers in the game before Dale Takalo comes on in relief.

"We'll put a plan together," Miller said. "We have five pitchers ready to throw. Burns is going to be the odds-on favorite. They're a senior, veteran group, with the best pitcher in the state (Ty Hueckman), who I'm sure didn't throw (Tuesday), but will Friday."

The Hilanders indeed defeated Irrigon Tuesday with two pitchers, Justin Lewellen and Zach McDonald, who combined for eight strikeouts and five walks, and nine hits allowed.

Hueckman is "a hard thrower and a great player," Miller said. "He'll be a handful for our kids. We're glad that we're the ones who get the chance to knock him off."

Burns will be facing Knappa's Takalo, who has never lost a game at the high school level.

The Hilanders will cer-

tainly have the "senior motivation" factor working for them. With seven seniors on the roster, this could be Burns' best opportunity to win a title for the near future.

With just one senior on the Knappa roster, the Loggers will certainly be the favorite at the 2A level next season, and the year after that.

To make the state championship game with three freshmen and seven sophomores on their roster, "it's a great accomplishment for this team and these kids," Miller said.

"At the same time, I know (this year's team) wants one more step. Celebrate and be happy with it. I know they're going to give it their best shot on Friday, and see what happens."

The Loggers take a 24-1 record into the game (51-1 over the last two years), while Burns is 24-5.

"Records don't mean anything," Miller said. "We don't have to beat them in a series. This isn't league play, this isn't a World Series ... it's a one-game deal, and I like our kids, how they've overcome things and how they battle. I like our kids' confidence, and we'll hopefully give Burns a run for their money."

Prediction: Look for a pitcher's duel, with Takalo and Hueckman battling. As always, it comes down to which team makes fewer mistakes in the field. In that case, we like Knappa's chances. Takalo and the Logger defense scores the win. Knappa 9, Burns 2.

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