

Mirror, Mirror: Crusaders capture back-to-back L4 softball titles

Ray Aspuria/The Times-Standard

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EUREKA -- Just like they did last season, the St. Bernard's High softball melted the Little 4 like a knife through hot butter as they claimed the league title outright in a twinbill sweep of Ferndale on Saturday.

Pitching and hitting blended together in harmony for the Crusaders as they topped the Wildcats 5-1 in game one and 11-1 in the game-shortened nightcap.

"They played well and hit the crap out of the ball today," said St. Bernard's head coach Alan Borges. "And the pitching was phenomenal. This is the best they've played all year."

A nice send off to the Crusader seniors that were honored before the start of game two as Saturday's shellacking of Ferndale marked the final regular-season home game for St. Bernard's.

The game one victory secured the league crown for St. Bernard's, but it was a pair of sophomores that helped keep the team 10-0 in the Little 4.

Pitcher Taylor Reed kept the Wildcats off balance while Jamie Gillespie hit an inside-the-park home run in the bottom of the fourth inning to put St. Bernard's above the 10-run mercy rule line.

But the modest Reed gave her defense equal credit for her performance.

"It's always good to have the defense behind you," she said. "It makes it a lot more comfortable and makes me a lot more confident as well."

The Wildcats struck early in the nightcap as a walk, single and another walk loaded the bases for Makenzie Burgess who knocked

in Sierra Earley with a sac-fly RBI.

That's the lone run Crusaders' pitcher Taylor Reed would afford Ferndale.

St. Bernard's answered quickly in the bottom of the first inning as a walk and an error put two on. Senior Kaitlyn Swihart boomed a shot to center field for a two-RBI single, 2-1 St. Bernard's.

Another walk put two more on and Sarah Ringler cleared the base paths with a two-RBI triple to the gap in right, center field, 4-1 Crusaders. Her stay at third was short as Gillespie ripped a single towards shortstop for a RBI single.

Unable to get any more runs, St. Bernard's held a 5-1 advantage until the bottom of the second inning.

Swihart earned RBI No. 3 in that frame knocking in a runner to give the Crusaders a 6-1 cushion. Gillespie added seventh run for St. Bernard's with a RBI single in the bottom of the third before St. Bernard's big fourth.

With Kelly Chambers taking over for Danielle Hansen on the mound for Ferndale, it appeared the team would get out of the inning quickly with two pop-fly outs.

"We want to win in the playoffs," Reed said.

No dice.

A pair of errors put runners at second and third base and Ringler collected an RBI on a chopper down the third-base line.

That brought up Gillespie who nailed Chambers' pitch towards right-center field. A Wildcat came charging to the ball but couldn't not grasp it as it hit the ground and rolled to the fence.

Borges quickly told his runners to go home, except for Gillespie, as the relay throw came in from the outfield. But the toss was nowhere near a Wildcat and with Gillespie more than halfway to third base, Borges signaled her home for the 11th Crusader run.

"I wish I didn't eat my French fries. That was what I really thought of," Gillespie said of the run around the bases. "I was hoping I'd keep going, but then coach said stop and then go."

But the work is far from done for St. Bernard's. The team closes out the regular season with a trip to Miranda to take on South Fork, and, after that is the North Coast Section Playoffs.

One goal is in hand, but there is another equally important one on the horizon.

"They want to show people they can move up a division and compete in that," Borges said.

St. Bernard's won the NCS Division VI title last season and moved up to the D-V bracket. New division, same desire.