

A Lucky Stick Named Gandalf, Familiar Champs And New Stars

Posted by John Millea (jmillea@mshsl.org) - Updated 6/8/2012 8:04:58 PM

It's an 85-mile drive from Klas Field at Hamline University in St. Paul to Caswell Park in North Mankato. Wonderful things happened at both places Friday and I enjoyed the heck out of the day, spending the morning at the state track meet before boogeying down to Mankato for the three state championship softball games.

I saw veteran athletes continue to dominate the track scene, I saw a young sprinting phenom whose name will surely become famous before her prep career is over, and I saw a softball team rally around a stick. No, not a softball bat but a stick. Let's start there...

NEW ULM'S BIG STICK

To the girls on the New Ulm High School softball team, the stick is known as Gandalf. The only Gandalf I know of is a character in J.R.R. Tolkien's novels *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, and I'm making an educated guess that the New Ulm girls saw the stick and immediately compared it to the staff carried by Gandalf (portrayed by Ian McKellen) in the movies of the same names.

Gandalf is a good-luck charm, there's no doubt about that. And the Eagles needed a little luck Friday, when they very nearly lost to St. Anthony Village before rallying for an eight-inning victory.

New Ulm trailed 5-4 before tying it 5-5 in the top of the seventh on an RBI single by Katie Frost. The teams went to the eighth inning with that score and New Ulm made the top of the eighth count. They loaded the bases with one out and went ahead 6-5 on a passed ball. And then came a big magical Gandalf moment: Brittany Hoffman hit a long fly ball that bounced off an outfielder's glove before dropping beyond the fence for a home run.

It was a 9-5 game, and nerves tingled on both sides when St. Anthony Village loaded the bases in the bottom of the eighth before New Ulm got the final out.

New Ulm coach Kristi Andersen Loose said the result came in "typical Eagle fashion. The girls come out like rock stars, get behind maybe a little bit, but they don't lose confidence, they don't lose faith, they just keep coming back. You never know how it's really going to happen.

"They came through and they did it. It wouldn't have been a state championship win if it would have happened any other way. It had to be a come-from-behind victory or it just wouldn't have been in Eagles fashion. What a great team to coach. I'm proud of them and they make me look so good."



Then came the key line of questioning: What's with the stick the girls were carrying around and passing to each other during the postgame celebration? The coach explained.

"At the beginning of the season we were at practice and they found this goofy-shaped stick. We had this infatuation with sticks; they found sticks and they'd bring them, playing music on them and making goofy noises out of them.

"One of our players, Liz Guggisberg, said, 'Why are you messing with those stupid sticks. I have some pretty cool sticks at home; my dad whittles these sticks.' She brought this majestic Gandalf and the girls were like, 'Oh my God, this is better than anything we've ever had!'"

The Eagles have rallied around Gandalf all season, giving it special treatment when things are going good and hoping it will help when they aren't.

"They know it's a goofy little thing," the coach said, "for them to smile and relax and take their mind off the game a little bit."