

M.C. Wins Class A State Crown in 1977

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Two weeks ago, Dan Kern called the Sentinel office and asked if we could come out and take a picture of the Miller City baseball team. "It's for the programs they print up for the state championships," Kern stated even before the Wildcats slipped by Fremont St. Joseph and downed Toledo Northwood in regional play. "They need the picture now just in case we make it to the state tournament."

The picture showed 14 ball players, two coaches, and four statisticians and carried a caption that described the team as the Putnam County League champions. Another caption could be added this week, as Miller City rewarded Kern's optimism with stunning wins over Lucasville Valley on Friday and Versailles on Saturday to win the Class A state baseball championship, marking the second straight year a Putnam County team has taken the title.

Leipsic, the defending state champ, was ousted from tournament action by Northwood in the first game of the Patrick Henry regional but Miller City succeeded in keeping the state crown within the boundaries of the county.

Mark Niese, a sure bet to take most valuable player honors if one had been given scored the winning run in Friday's semi-final 3-1 win over Lucasville Valley and came back Saturday with an individual performance that would have rivaled the feats of Superman, Mohammed Ali, and King Kong combined. An overflow crowd of Miller City fans watched as Niese started the deciding game for the Wildcats, allowed just four hits and one run before being relieved by Tim Schroeder in the sixth and knocked in all four runs in the 4-2 championship final to bring home the title for the Wildcats.

The state championship trophy belongs to Miller City now, but the path to the state title was not an easy one. A late inning rally had to be stopped Friday to push the Wildcats into Saturday's final and the championship match up had as much excitement as Hank Aaron's 715th home run. Tim Schroeder, with pitching gems in the regional opener against Fremont and coming through with another sparkling performance in the semifinals against Lucasville, collected Friday's win, but needed Niese's relief help with a threatening rally brewing in the seventh. Niese handled an infield popup for the second out and struck out the final batter to preserve the win and Schroeder returned the favor Saturday, relieving Niese in the sixth and preserving the state championship win.

For Niese, nothing short of a state championship would do. Niese suffered the Wildcats' lone loss last season, a 5-4 district upset at the hands of Kalida after an undefeated season and the senior hurler went after his goal with a passion. Versailles failed to tag the flame-throwing right hander with any authority until the sixth inning and by then Niese had insured himself of a well-guarded lead.

Versailles' starter, John Kindell, was pretty good at throwing smoke himself but failed to show the control of his Miller City counterpart, a problem that put the Tigers in a hole in the third inning that got deeper as the game wore on. Kindell issued walks to John Lammers and Wayne Pester in that inning, his fourth and fifth of the game, and when his first two pitches to Dan Hermiller failed to hit the strike zone, it was time for a change.

Mark Schlater, the winning pitcher in Friday's 11-2 win over Richmond Heights came in from centerfield to take over for Kindell

but threw two more balls past Hermiller to load the bases. Niese then stepped in and drilled Schlater's first offering to center field and when new center fielder, Tim Platt, failed to make a shoestring catch, there was only a chain-link fence between the ball and a jam-packed parking lot. Niese was thrown out trying to stretch an easy double into a slim triple but three runs had danced across the plate unmolested and the margin of victory was made. "I love to hit the first pitch," Niese stated after his base clearing blast. "He laid one right over the plate and I jumped on it."

With a bulging 3-0 lead in hand, Niese set to work to make it stand up and with Wayne Pester and Tim Schroeder vacuuming up everything in sight in the infield, Versailles' threats on Miller City's lead were stifled until a hit batter, a dropped tag on a steal, and John Stammen's long double made it a 3-1 ballgame in the sixth.

"I had no intentions of taking Mark (Niese) out at the time," Kern stated after Versailles scored in the sixth. "Mark felt that Tim (Schroeder) could do a better job late in the game like that and the decision to come out was his."

"Tim usually gets the batters to hit it on the ground and that's what we needed right then," Niese stated after moving to short and placing Tim Schroeder in the same spot he had inherited the day before. Schroeder, true to form, retired the side in the bottom of the sixth to stop the rally, gave up an unearned run on a double, an infield out and a wild pitch in the seventh, and made Niese's prediction stand up by getting the last out of the game on a grounder to Niese at short.

Although Niese collected the win with his pitching and hitting, one of the biggest plays of the game was made by Coach Kern from the bench. John Kindell doubled for the Tigers in the fifth and apparently scored on a base hit by Doug Mescher. Kern instructed Niese to throw to third and appeal the play, however, and Kindell was ruled out, having missed the bag while rounding third. The appeal cancelled the run and was the third out of the inning, stopping a possible rally and preserving Miller City's 3-0 lead.

Niese, not satisfied with his third inning heroics at the plate, drilled a run-scoring single in the seventh after Wayne Pester and Dan Hermiller had been hit with pitches.

No MVP award was presented in the tournament but Niese would have been a shoo-in for the honor. Besides preserving Friday's win and hurling the win Saturday, the senior hurler scored the winning run on an overthrow at third Friday, knocked in all of Miller City's runs Saturday, and batted .500 in the finals with three singles and a double in eight trips to the plate.

Miller City	003 000 1 4 5 4
Versailles	000 001 1 2 5 0

Niese, Schroeder (6) and Hermiller; Kindell, Schlater (3) and Stammen.