

# Cat Girls' Comebacks Fall Short At State

MANHATTAN—It just may have been the shortest rally in state history...but it was as deadly as the bite of a cobra.

Clay Center strapped together four quick hits in the fourth inning in eight pitches to sink the Mulvane High School hopes in the opening round of the 1996 Class 4A State Softball Championship here at Cicco Park.

The No. 1 seeded Tigers broke up a 0-0 contest with three runs in the fourth inning and held on for a 3-0 verdict, advancing into the semifinals. Clay Center eventually finished third, nosing out Paola, 1-0, the next day. Santa Fe Trail, a perennial powerhouse, jogged past Kansas City Piper, 6-2, in the championship game.

Piper nipped Clay Center, 5-4, in one semifinal and Santa Fe Trail rolled past Paola, 5-4, in the other semi.

Mulvane High School softball coach Charlie Mason was philosophical about the Wildcats' first visit to the "big dance." Clay Center just did a little more high stepping. "It was a great game," said Mason. "We played an excellent game. We did a good job. I don't know where we could have improved. We didn't have any errors and Susan (Wenger) pitched a tremendous ball game. We just didn't put our hits together and they did. That was the ball game."

Wenger, a senior, ended her high school career with unmatched style. She scattered seven hits and walked only one batter. Clay

Center finally got to her with a short flurry of hits in the fourth after two were out. It looked like the game could go all night until Jessica Frigon lined a single to center with two down. On the next pitch, Kelly Blake, who had three hits against Wenger, ripped a single. Wenger threw two strikes past Amber Close but she hit a run-scoring single on the next pitch, and two pitches later, Emily Hafner ripped triple over leftfielder Lee Cates' head. Eight pitches, three runs. Point, set game. Clay Center was 22-1 and Mulvane was headed home with a 10-14 record.

"For being there for the first time, I thought we did a good job," said Mason. "It's easy for me to say this but I thought we were the fourth-best team there. They bunched those hits together and that was the ball game. That was the difference between winning and losing."

The Wildcats hadn't made a noise offensively until the next inning but were luckless. Senior Valeri Larson roped a single right to the rightfielder, who was playing in on the dirt and was able to throw Larson out to start the fifth. Outfielder NiChelle Bruce then broke up the perfect game by CC's Melissa Hafner by singling. After Shelley Richards tapped back to the pitcher for the first out, Lee Cates popped a single to rightfield. It would have scored at least one and maybe two.

"That would have gotten us going," offered Mason. "I already was starting to

think about a pinch-runner for Valeri, but we came away with nothing. That was a tough one to take."

Freshman Lindsay Kendrick hammered a double over the centerfielder's head with one out in the sixth but she died there when Jessica Sheridan struck out looking and Janelle Wenke tapped back to the pitcher.

One last inning and one last run at a win, but it fell short. Bruce hammered a triple to the fence in center but Richards and Cates couldn't bring her home.

Meanwhile, Wenger was working overtime to keep the Cats in the game, getting out of two-on rallies in both the fifth and sixth innings.

"It's too bad we had to lose like that but when you get to that level, that's what happens," stressed Mason. "Everybody's good up there. We talked about being there and being one of the eight best teams in the state and I really feel our girls showed a lot of courage holding on in that game and nearly getting something going."

Usually, it's the team that makes the fewest mistakes wins. In this case, it was the team that made the biggest plays. "We made all our plays defensively but they made the big one when it counted. Getting Valeri at first base was a big, big play. That could have turned into several runs for us. They made the play, though; and they made another one to end the game. Our outfield probably had more opportunities than dur-

Class 4A State Softball Tournament	
CHAMPIONSHIP	
Santa Fe Trail 6, KC Piper 2	
THIRD PLACE	
Clay Center 1, Paola 0	
SEMIFINALS	
KC Piper 5, Clay Center 4	
Santa Fe Trail 5, Paola 4	
FIRST ROUND	
Mulvane	000 000-0 4
Clay Center	000 030 x-3 8
Susan Wenger and Shelley Richards; Melissa Hafner and Jessica Frigon.	
Santa Fe Trail 7, Holton 0	
Paola 7, Pratt 3	
Kansas City Piper 5, Labette County 0	

ing any game this season but we also met the challenges."

The Cat outfielder trio of Cates in left, Bruce in center and Wenke in right were busy. They made seven putouts. Bruce made the best catch, a running stab for the second out in the 6th inning that put the skids on a promising Tiger rally and kept the Cats within shouting range.

"It was a good experience for our young squad," added Mason, who expects to get to the "Big Apple" of the Plains again next year. "We expect to get back there next year," said Mason. "The girls all got a taste of what it was like and I think they liked it. We got there this year, now maybe next year, we can stay a while."



Hitting the dirt -- Mulvane outfielder NiChelle Bruce slides into third with a triple as Coach Charlie Mason points the way



Cat pitcher Susan Wenger cuts loose against Clay Center