



Photo by Joe Brown

Southwest Minnesota State University's **Krista Steen**, front, heads home and **Kiley Petersen**, back, gets to second after a single by Katie Turner during Game 2 against St. Cloud State Wednesday at Mustang Field. Steen scored a run on the play.

SMSU softball splits with Huskies

By Joe Brown
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MARSHALL — The Southwest Minnesota State University softball team knows there is one attribute that is preventing it from a fifth straight Northern Sun Intercollegiate Conference title: consistency.

On Wednesday against St. Cloud State at Mustang Field, the Mustangs' offense was in full swing during a 4-1 Game 1 victory. But in the second game, despite a late-inning surge, SMSU couldn't keep up the Game 1 momentum, falling 8-6 to the Huskies.

Mustangs' head coach Shawn Semler said he didn't know whether to be mad about the split or excited about the Game 1 win and the Game 2 near comeback.

"They showed some heart coming back, but heart's not a victory," Semler said. "We expect that here. We got to learn how to take care of teams and earn splits. ... We need to take the teams we put down in the first game and have a chance to (sweep)." With the split, the Mustangs go to

5-5 in the NSIC, 12-13 overall. St. Cloud State is 6-6 in the NSIC, 19-15 overall. Both teams are tied for eighth in the conference.

After dropping a pair of games to Mary at home Sunday, SMSU had to get its offense in check. In the two losses to the Marauders, the Mustangs were held to three runs and 11 hits total.

"Coming out after getting swept (against Mary on Sunday), it lit a fire under our butts," said center fielder Christine Borowiak. It's good just to know we can pick ourselves right back up."

Scoreless through two innings, Meaghan Laetsch led off the third with an infield single. After a sacrifice bunt by Brittney Hallahan and a passed ball to advance to third, Laetsch scored on a single to right field by Amy Dreessen. Dreessen would get to home on an infield single by Amanda Neumann.

After Lizzy Dwyer scored a run to bring St. Cloud State within a run, Krista Steen and Andrea Fennern scored runs in the fifth and sixth

innings, respectively, to go up 4-1. "After Mary, we needed to come out and have a good day offensively," Neumann said. "I think we're ready to move on now."

On the mound, Lauren Smith started the game for the Mustangs, going 3²/₃ innings. Ali Honken came on in

Softball PAGE 2B

Mustang baseball sweeps BSU

Southwest Minnesota State University pounded 10 home runs in two games to complete a Northern Sun Intercollegiate Conference sweep on the road Wednesday against Bemidji State. SMSU battled hard for the 14-8 victory in Game 1, but then cruised

Baseball PAGE 6B

Rain, Red Sox fall on Twins at Target Field

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The rain came down, the crowd cheered, and the Red Sox and Twins kept playing.

"Out-door base-ball," some fans chanted Wednesday in the second game at Target Field.

John Lackey didn't seem to mind getting wet, either.

Lackey turned in a second strong start and Jeremy Hermida gave Boston room with a three-run double in the eighth inning, leading the Red Sox past Minnesota 6-3.

For the first time in 29 years, rain fell on the Twins at home.

"It held up pretty good. We didn't slip or anything," Twins center fielder Denard Span.

The crowd of 38,164, more than 1,000 below capacity, rediscovered baseball's unique relationship with the weather. Temperature at first pitch was 73 degrees, but raindrops fell intermittently from the third through the eight innings.

Some fans scurried for the concourses and others hastily put up their umbrellas, but the first shower led to another celebration of Minnesota's move out of the Metrodome to an open-air facility.

Lackey (1-0) lasted 6 2-3 innings for his first Red Sox victory, lifted early by Marco Scutaro's two singles and Dustin Pedroia's RBI double and solo home run. Scutaro batted leadoff again for the injured Jacoby Ellsbury, and Hermida filled in as the left fielder.

"Honestly, there was probably one inning there where it was kind of pretty slick," Lackey said. "Once they fixed it, it was great the last two innings that I was out there."

Twins starter Kevin Slowey (1-1) inched through five, giving up three runs and taking the loss after several discussions on the mound with Joe Mauer about pitch selection.

"He wanted to do something, and I wanted to do something else," Mauer said. "We're both in it to try to get outs. So go out there and talk about it and come up with a plan."

After a sharp start last week in a win over the Los Angeles Angels, Slowey never found his footing — even literally in the fifth following Pedroia's two-out shot.

Slowey gave up a single and a walk



Twins PAGE 6B



A FAMILY'S WILL

■ Lou Gehrig's disease limits Mary Jo Kurka's mobility, but it hasn't kept her from enjoying her son Will's memorable senior year

By Matt Dahlseid
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Photos by Matt Dahlseid /
photo illustration by Aaron
Schlemmer

With a 6-foot-4 frame, Will Kurka's physical tools made him one of the area's top high school receivers in football and a dominant post player in basketball.

As a senior, he led the Minneota football team in touchdown receptions (15) as the Vikings won the Class A state title. In basketball, he was the team's leading rebounder and second-leading scorer as Minneota put together its best season in school history with a 19-7 record. Will's combination of size and agility drew the attention of college football scouts in the region and he has accepted a scholarship offer to play at Southwest Minnesota State University.

Will PAGE 3B

SCHEDULE

Area Baseball

Marshall at Redwood Valley
Dawson-Boyd at RCW
Minneota at Lincoln HI
Canby at TMB
BOLD at YME
RRCWWG at MCC
Wabasso at New Ulm Cathedral
RTR at MACCRAY
Area Softball
Lakeview at Minneota/Canby (DH)

KMS at TMB
YME at BOLD
MCC at RRCWWG
New Ulm Cathedral at Wabasso
Area Track
Marshall at Willmar
Lakeview at MACCRAY
Area Golf
Marshall at Montevideo (Girls)
TMB at WWG
YME at BOLD (Boys)

SCORES

Wednesday's Scores

College Softball
SMSU 4, St. Cloud State 1
St. Cloud State 8, SMSU 6
College Baseball
SMSU 14, Bemidji State 8
SMSU 12, Bemidji State 4

IN THE NEWS

First hole-in-one of season recorded at Marshall Golf Club

Todd Madden recorded the first hole-in-one of the season Wednesday at Marshall Golf Course.

Madden used a 4-iron on the 170-yard, par-3 ninth hole. He was playing with Brad Cool and Steve Schuler.

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Will FROM PAGE 1B

While Will's body has allowed him so many opportunities, his mother's has been failing her for the past 13 years.

Mary Jo Kurka has amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. The degenerative neuromuscular condition has rendered her almost completely immobile and has taken away her ability to speak.

But the mother of five hasn't allowed the things that she can't do define who she is. If her children need a word of advice, she can give it. When they need her support, she's there for them.

As Will's sports team's have made their long runs through the regular season and postseason, Mary Jo has been on the sidelines watching him in her wheelchair. She can't clap when Will makes a basket. She can't cheer when he catches a touchdown pass. But she's there.

"It's great just seeing her. It's not easy for her to get to the games," Will said. "I play football and stuff, but I know I'll never be quite as tough as mom is."

Growing up

Will was around five years old when Mary Jo was diagnosed with ALS.

For a child so young, it can be hard to fathom a parent having a disease so serious. According to the ALS Association, only 20 percent of people with ALS live longer than five years after their initial diagnosis.

"At that age, you don't really put together what's going to happen in the future," Will said. "You don't really understand what's all going to take place."

Mary Jo, a registered nurse, began to notice the signs that something was wrong. At first, she began having trouble with her fine motor skills — controlling the small muscles of her hands. About three years into the disease's progression, she was unable to walk and eventually lost the use of her arms.

Gary Kurka, who has

been married to Mary Jo for 34 years, was a teacher and a coach at Marshall Area Christian School when his wife was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease. He had to leave the job soon after to assist Mary Jo, who was already struggling to perform simple, everyday tasks.

"Even by that next fall, it wasn't going to be possible for me to go back there because at that point we didn't have any nurses, so I needed to be around," said Gary, who is now a pastor at a small church near Bruce, S.D. "It was at that time that I was doing the cooking and feeding because it was becoming difficult for her to even pick up a spoon or a fork."

Eventually, nurses came into the home to tend to Mary Jo, but Will, his sister Sara, who is now 27, and brothers James (20), Grant (14) and Ethan (13) have all played their part in helping their mother.

For older children, coping with a parent's physical deterioration can be difficult. For Will, Grant and Ethan, the situation is almost all they've ever known.

"Just being young, it wasn't like a huge adjustment for me," Will said. "I was young enough and it went slowly enough at first where it was just everyday life. It's not like everything changed in an instant. It was a pretty slow progression. You just take it all in stride."

Six years ago, Mary Jo had a tracheotomy procedure to allow her to breathe better, but lost her ability to talk. Today, she does most of her communicating with a specialized program on her computer that allows her to spell out words and create messages by clicking a button with her foot — a movement she can perform when her legs are positioned correctly.

Mary Jo also communicates with the help of an alphabet chart, that has letters arranged in rows and columns. A person holds the chart in front of Mary Jo and move his or her finger across the chart and she

blinks when the finger comes to the letter she wants to use. The other person then goes onto the next letter or tries to guess the word or phrase Mary Jo is thinking.

Although this way of life is normal for Will, he admits that his family's unique situation has helped him grow up faster and allows him to put things into perspective.

While Gary and Mary Jo would obviously have preferred to raise their children under normal circumstance, they say there have been some positive things that have come from their situation.

"I think it's probably made some changes in their lives, and I don't think they're necessarily bad changes," Gary said. "For example, maybe now they see people who are handicapped or in chairs, I don't think they're phased by it at all."

Mary Jo also thinks Will has matured more quickly than other children his age as a result of her affliction and she's proud of the person he's become.

"Yes, he was very easy to raise," she said of Will, with the aid of nurse Candi Reynolds using the alphabet chart.

A sports family

Through everything, sports have always united the Kurka family.

Will said his parents and siblings are all very competitive and have enjoyed spending time playing different sports with each other or rooting on one another at games.

"Everyone's involved in sports big time," Will said. "It's kind of a fixture in the family. It definitely started with mom and dad. Dad was into sports in high school and played basketball in high school. Mom was really supportive of all of us in sports and played some softball."

When Gary left his job in Marshall to care for his wife, he began coaching girls basketball at Minneota High School and coached his daughter, Sara, for three years until she graduated in 2000. Balancing coaching and helping Mary Jo put Gary in an awkward position at times. He said there was once a situation where a nurse was unable to show up one morning when he had a 6 a.m. practice scheduled and he had to pack up his whole family and take them all to practice.

At Sara's games, Will would frequently wheel his mother around and help feed her — a far from average outing for a child under 10 years old.

"I remember bringing her to games," Will said. "She was in a wheelchair at the time. I remember bringing her to the old gym at SMSU and playoff games and stuff. She always got really, really nervous."

Gary stopped coaching a year after Sara graduated, but sports have remained a big part of the Kurka's life. Since that time, probably no sports season has been as thrilling for the family as Will's senior year.

Will said Mary Jo went to all of his home football and basketball games, some important road games, and all of the playoff games.

Getting to the games is

“It's great just seeing her. It's not easy for her to get to the games. I play football and stuff, but I know I'll never be quite as tough as mom is.”

— Will Kurka

no easy task for Mary Jo. With getting Mary Jo into her wheelchair, putting her and her equipment in the family's small bus, driving to the football field or gymnasium, and wheeling her into position, it can take up to an hour to go just a few blocks to a Vikings' home game, let alone a trip to the Metrodome in Minneapolis for the team's state championship football game.

Even considering all the work, Mary Jo said it's worth it to be there to support her son.

"Very fun to watch him," she said, with the aid of the alphabet chart.

And what emotions does Mary Jo go through during the game? The same as any other mother.

"(I'm) nervous. (I) want him to win. (I'm) competitive," she added.

In fact, Mary Jo's nerves almost hindered the Vikings' chances of winning the state title this year. Will said when he was younger, she tried to pay him to go out for cross country instead of football because she didn't want him to get hurt. Luckily for the Vikings, he didn't take the offer and the decision has paid off for everyone.

Things have changed as Will has gotten older, and this year Mary Jo and Gary both helped convince Will to go out for baseball this season after he had been away from the game since his sophomore year.

Working as a team

Minneota's football and basketball teams were both loaded with talent, but wouldn't have had the success they did without the players working as one.

Vikings basketball head coach Val Whipple said Will exemplified the perfect teammate during his time on the team.

"He's just a swell leader and encouraged the kids to do their best and worked extremely hard during his career to become a good low-post player," he said. "He loves to play the game and he's just an outstanding individual."

It's always been easy for Will to embrace the team concept in sports because he's also part of a team when he's at home.

The Kurka family has eight nurses and nine personal care attendants who help take care of Mary Jo.

Mary Jo also plays a role in the family's day-to-day life. A leading role, her husband would say.

"Sometimes it's hard to believe when you see her sitting in her chair, and communication can be difficult at times, but she really runs things around here," Gary said. "There's no doubt about it. She's got more of a handle on everybody's schedule and where they should be and what should be done. She was

Independent file photo
Minneota's **Will Kurka** runs downfield after making a catch in the Class A semifinals against Blooming Prairie November 21, 2009, in the Metrodome in Minneapolis.



like that before, so that really hasn't changed too much."

Will's parents have both noticed the team concept take center stage in how their son approaches life and sports.

"One of the things both Mary Jo and I have felt with Will, is that he has always kind of had that team mentality," Gary said. "In fact, I remember one time in football when some (scouts) came to see him play and I think that particular game, (quarterback Sam Derynck) threw to him one time. They were talking to Will after the game and said they were disappointed he wasn't thrown to more and Will said, 'I don't care. We won.'"

"I think his mindset has been about whatever he can do to help the team."

Close to home

Whether or not the Minneota baseball team has a run like the football or basketball teams, the Kurka's have enjoyed their time watching Will compete during his thrilling senior year. But the ride doesn't stop after the Vikings' final out.

On June 26, Will will play in the Minnesota High



Independent file photo

Minneota's **Will Kurka**, left, makes a layup during the Vikings' Section 3A-North semifinals win over Dawson-Boyd Mar. 11 at the R/A Facility in Marshall.

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