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SOFTBALL REGIONALS

Bird's-eye view of state's top pitchers

Catchers at HSE, Avon and Center Grove help battery mates thrive

By Jeff Rabjohns

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On almost every pitch, Brett Williams sees what makes teammate Morgan Melloh so dangerous.

Take the rise ball.

"Morgan has two rise balls, one for a strike that jumps only about a foot and another for a chase pitch or a high riser than can rise 2 to 3 feet," Williams said.

Nasty stuff, to be sure.

A junior at Hamilton Southeastern, Williams has a unique perspective as the catcher for one of the state's top high school pitchers.

She shares that designation with two other catchers from state-ranked teams that will be in action in Saturday's Class 4A regional at Center Grove.

Top-ranked Hamilton Southeastern (27-0) plays No. 8 Center Grove (25-4) at 11 a.m. with No. 3 Avon (26-3) facing Cathedral (13-18) at 1 p.m. Winners play at 7 p.m. for the right to advance to the four-team state finals.

Melloh, a senior left-hander, is 23-0 with a 0.13 earned run average and 354 strikeouts in 156 innings. Williams, a three-year starter, bats leadoff and is the team's top hitter with a .438 average. She was voted team captain by her teammates.

"Whenever I feel like I didn't do my job, she'll go to the mound and talk to me. She helps me out a lot," Melloh said.

"Whenever I'm in a difficult situation, she points at me and points back to her, which says to me, 'It's just you and me pitching and catching like the batter's not even there.' "

Sophomore Jenny Esparza has powered Avon's run. The sophomore has a 0.26 ERA with 386 strikeouts in 186 2/3 innings. Her catcher is classmate Helen Rogers, who leads the Orioles in home runs (five) and RBIs (32).

"Helen makes Jenny better," Avon coach Jenny Shayotovich said. "You have to have confidence in who's back there, especially when you throw several different pitches like Jenny does.

"The catcher has to know where the ball's going, but if Jenny does make a mistake, no one even knows because Helen is there to make a great play."

At Center Grove, sophomore Sydney Miller handles classmate Emily Gwaltney (15-1). Gwaltney has a 0.39 ERA and 101 strikeouts in 107 innings.

"The thing about catching Emily is that it's a great privilege because she's such a phenomenal pitcher," said Miller, who is also one of the team's top hitters with a .368 average and 15 RBIs.

Two of the battery mates have been together for a long time. Miller first caught Gwaltney

when they played on a 10-and-under team. Rogers and Esparza also go back to youth leagues together. Williams first caught Melloh in high school.

Sometimes catchers are multisport athletes. Williams and Miller also play volleyball and basketball.

Catching a top pitcher is a dichotomy in some ways. It is more difficult because better pitchers have more speed, more movement and more variety of pitches. It's easier because the top pitchers have more control.

"If you have a top-notch pitcher who throws hard and makes the ball move, it's very important," Hamilton Southeastern coach Dave Cook said of having a talented catcher. "I think it's made us a better ball team for the past three years."