Jake Watts signed on the dotted line Monday afternoon, making official, his announcement that he's going to take his game to the next level next season.

He signed his national letter of intent with Milligan College, an NAIA school and a member of the Appalacian Athletic Conference, located in Johnson City, TN. Watts, a senior at Watauga High, is coming off a magnificent season last spring. A spot starter/releiver, Watts put up some impressive numbers against some of the best teams in the state to earn his scholarship offer. Watts was 3-2 with a 2.82 earned-run-average and a save. He gave up just 18 earned runs in 44 2/3 innings of work. The righthander struck out 44 men and walked just 16. And he didn't do it against chopped liver. Instead, he did it against some of the best teams in western North Carolina, let alone, the entire state.

"Jake was really our hottest pitcher late last season," said WHS coach Pete Hardee. "He went up against the likes of Providence, Mount Tabor and North Davidson, and he beat those teams. He's got a bulldog mentality. He won't back down, he'll challenge and go after the hitters."

It was that yeoman type attitude that sold Watts to Milligan College coach Nathan Meade. He spotted Watts at a showcase at UNC-Asheville last summer, and let's just say, what he saw was good enough for him.

"Jake has a great body, one he's really going to grow into it in the next few years," said Meade, who has been with the Milligan program for ten years as a player, an assistant coach and now about to begin his fifth year as head coach. "He's got a very good fastball, but what I like the most is his toughness. He's real quiet off the field, but once he get on the mound, he's an entirely different person. He's real aggressive and he's someone we feel can help our program."

The Buffaloes will be hit hard by graduation this spring, and Meade is on the recruiting trail trying to find the right pieces to rebuild his program.

"This incoming freshman class (next fall) is very important to us," Meade said. "That's why we're so high on Jake. I wanted him as soon as I saw him on the mound at UNC-A. He has a very good fastball, but what I like most is that he can move the ball around. He knows how to get people out."

Despite all the accolades from his current coach and his soon-to-be new head coach, Watts remains humble. His has a boyish look and a very shy demeanor. But looks can be deceiving, even though the youngster down played his achievements.

"Dylan (Norris) and Cal (Hardee) took care of the conference stuff, and I got to pitch a lot of non-conference games." he said. "I also got a lot of work late in the season as a reliever. It went well, I guess. We were pretty good."

Watts likes to mix things up. He has a good fastball, but he compliments it with a pretty good curve ball, a nice slider and a change up. And he used those pitches rather effectively in getting people out on a consistent basis last spring and summer.

"I am so proud of Jake how far he's come in just four years," Hardee said. "He's one of the hardest working pitchers I've ever had. This opportunity is a tribute to him and all that hard work. And he took every start as a challenge.

"Beating Providence, North Davidson and Mount Tabor, that's a tougher lineup than our (Northwestern 3A/4A) conference opponents. I'm looking for him to continue that this season,

and to have a great year for us."

And the Pioneers, who won 16 games last season, will be looked upon as a contender in the NW3A/4A conference again this season. And with Norris and Watts in the starting rotation, Hardee feels his team is gearing up for what could be a very special year.

"With our two senior pitchers signed, it takes a lot of pressure off of them," Hardee said. "Now they can focus on the upcoming season without having to worry about where they're going to play the following year. And Jake was our ace, our most consistent pitcher down the stretch last season. And I feel he and Dylan (who signed with Pfieffer University a Division II school in the South Atlantic Conference November 10) will be strong leaders for us this season."

The Pioneers open their season at A.C. Reynolds on March 1. And like past years, Hardee has loaded up the schedule with a variety of strong teams. And for Watts, who will be making his way to Milligan next fall, he feels very comfortable with his situation.

"Coach Hardee and coach (Andy) Fox (now the head coach at Wilkes Community College) really taught me to pitch," he said. "They really believed in me, and I've worked at it. I played a lot of baseball this summer, and worked out with our team on a regular basis. Milligan made me a good offer, one I was very comfortable with, and I am very pleased with my decision."

And the Buffaloes couldn't have made a better choice.