The Watauga High baseball team continued its winning ways Saturday afternoon.

The Pioneers (6-2) got themselves geared up for Tuesday's big Northwestern 3A/4A showdown with Alexander Central by knocking off A.C. Reynolds 7-3 in their home opener at Pioneer Field. The Pioneers broke the game open with a four-run fourth inning. Josh Roberts had a run-scoring double, Matt Proffitt, Ethan Critcher and Ethan Greene had RBI singles. Proffitt worked the first four innings, struck out four and picked up his firsrt win of the year. Tyler Jones finished up and picked up his first save.

Now, it's back to conference play Tuesday night in Taylorsville as the Pioneers take on their biggest rivals, the Cougars. And over the years, these teams have played some memorable games. Let's turn the page back to 1997, Pete Hardee's second year as head coach of the Pioneers. Alexander Central, led by Gary Comer at the time, is dominating the old Northwestern 4A Conference.

But the Pioneers, behind Nathan Chaney who developed into a closer with three saves in league play that year for the Pioneers, comes on in relief and nails down a huge upset win against the Cougars. In 1998, the Cougars are the last team the late Bobby Welborn pitches against. They beat the Pioneers, who are making their first appearance ever in the finals, in the conference championship game at Crest High School.

Fast forward to 2002, and the Cougars, a No.5 seed, and WHS, a No.7 seed, march their way to the conference finals. And Who can forget the bench-clearing brawl between these teams in the 2003 conference championship game.

Yes, it's been a storied rivalry, and one that's been hotly contested over the years. And Tuesday night's game shouldn't be any different.

The Pioneers and the Cougars (2-5; 2-1) begin the night in a two-way tie for second place. They trail South Caldwell by just one-half game for the No.1 seed. And the Cougars, who began the year with five consecutive losses, are riding a two-game winning streak. They defeated St. Stephens 7-3 on Friday night.

"It doesn't matter what the records are," said WHS coach Pete Hardee. "This is a rivalry. I don't have to say much of anything when they come up on the schedule. Our players know who they are, and they'll be ready to play."

The scheduled starters Tuesday night will be Dylan Norris for the Pioneers and Brennan James for the Cougars. Norris picked up his first win of the season Friday night with a strong effort in relief against Fred T. Foard. The righthander struck out seven of the 11 men he faced. James struck out eight men and threw a no-hitter against Hickory in Alexander Central's conference opener last Wednesday.

The Cougars are led by coach Jerry Whitman, a solid baseball man who played for the legendary Fred Lanford at South Caldwell, and who coached under Comer for five years at Alexander Central. He took over an under-achieving team that only won eight games in 2009 and led them to 15 wins in his first year as coach last season.

The Cougars, a No.3 seed last year, followed that up by blowing out South Caldwell in the opening round of the state playoffs before they were finally eliminated in second-round play. Eleven seniors and ten returnees are back in 2011. And the Cougars are also blessed with

three players that will play at the collegiate level next season. James, who is their best athlete, has signed to play with UNC-Greensboro; Lukas LaSalle, one of the best catchers in the conference the last three years, moves to the outfield this season. He has signed with Appalachian State. And Logan Galliher, their best outfielder and one of their best hitters, has signed with Erskine College.

And like WHS, the Cougars are blessed with a lot of speed. But the Pioneers have had the better of it lately in this series. WHS has won four in a row against the Cougars, which includes a season sweep last season.

And Norris made two appearances against Alexander Central last year. He was 2-0 with a 2.92 earned-run-average. In 12 innings of work, Norris gave up five earned runs on 13 hits with four walks and seven strikeouts. James will be making his first career start against the Pioneers.

Hitting-wise, LaSalle has been Alexander Central's most productive hitter against the Pioneers going 4-5 with a run scored. David Martin has been Watauga's top hitter against the Cougars going 5-7 with a home run,, two runs-batted-in and three runs scored.

"It'll be a lot of fun playing down in Taylorsville," Hardee said. "It's a great baseball atmosphere down there, and it's a tough place to play. Beating Fred T. Foard (Friday night) like we did will give us a lot of confidence going into that game."

Our coverage begins at 6 pm Tuesday night on Oldies 100.7 FM.

NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONERENCE SCOREBOARD:

SATURDAY'S GAMES:

WHS 7, A.C.REYNOLDS 3
HICKORY 2, NORTH LINCOLN 0
HIBRITEN 12, WEST WILKES 2