

Pioneers Move Into First Place

Written by Mike Kelly

Wednesday, 23 March 2011 08:46

The Watauga High baseball team was rewarded for its efforts Tuesday night.

The Pioneers built an early 5-0 lead and hung on to beat Alexander Central 5-3 at Gryder Stadium in Taylorsville. The win, coupled with Fred T. Foard's 6-4, nine-inning victory over South Caldwell, moves the Pioneers (7-2 overall; 3-1 in the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference) into a first place tie with the Spartans in the NW3A/4A Conference standings.

"And we've been doing this on the road," WHS coach Pete Hardee said. "We've only played one home game, so far. And if we can keep weathering the storm, and win on Friday down in Hickory, we're going to be in pretty good shape. We've got a lot of home games coming up."

As a matter of fact, the Pioneers will play eight consecutive home games beginning next Tuesday with Saint Stephens. And the Pioneers, who have won three in a row following that disappointing loss at South Caldwell on March 14, didn't waste any time jumping to an early lead against the Cougars (2-6; 2-2).

The Pioneers, who left four men on base in the first two innings against losing pitcher Tad Ratliff, a freshman making his varsity debut, finally broke through thanks to a two-run double by Tyler Jones in the third. WHS followed that up with a three-run explosion in the fourth.

Pinch-hitter Garrison McGruire, batting for Ethan Greene, highlighted the frame with a first-pitch, two-run homer (his first of the year) over the left-centerfield wall. David Martin added a run-scoring single three batters later and that gave WHS a commanding 5-0 lead.

Dylan Norris, who was coming off a stellar effort in relief last Friday night against Fred T. Foard, made it stand up as he carried the Pioneers into the fifth inning. But the righthander, who held Alexander Central to just one hit in the first three innings, was finally touched up for a pair of runs in the fourth.

Ratliff helped his own cause with a two-out, two-run single that put the Cougars on the board.

They pushed another run across in the fifth on Logan Galliher's run-scoring single.

But Jake Watts came on and put out the fire as he struck out Taylor Pennell to end the threat.

"Dylan was a little spent following that relief appearance last Friday against Foard," Hardee said. "He really pitched on guts tonight. (Cougars) really helped him out, too. They were swinging early and were very aggressive at the plate. They know how tough he's been on them in the past. That kept his pitch count down."

But Norris, who is 3-0 lifetime against the Cougars, picked up his second win of the year. He gave up three runs, two earned in 4 ²/₃ innings of work. He allowed six hits and struck out six men. Watts, who picked up his first save of the year, had his anxious moments, but the righthander struck out five men and gave up just one hit in 2 ¹/₃ innings in relief.

"I really felt Jake didn't loosen up until the seventh inning," Hardee said. "It takes him a while to

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get loose. But he did a great job and shut them down. (Alexander Central) always plays us tough, especially here. This is another tough place to play in our conference, and I'm just glad we got out of here with a win."

The Pioneers travel to Hickory Friday night. The Red Tornadoes, behind Tyler Poole who threw a complete game, defeated St. Stephens 3-2. Our coverage of that game begins at 6 pm on Oldies 100.7 FM.

NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONFERENCE STANDINGS:

WATAUGA 3-1; 7-2

SOUTH CALDWELL 3-1; 6-1

FRED T. FOARD 3-2; 5-4

HICKORY 2-2; 6-4

ALEXANDER CENTRAL 2-2; 2-6

ST. STEPHENS 1-3; 2-5

HIBRITEN 1-3; 2-7

TUESDAY NIGHT'S GAMES:

WHS 5, ALEXANDER CENTRAL 3

HICKORY 3, ST. STEPHENS 2

FRED T. FOARD 6, SOUTH CALDWELL 4 (9 INNINGS)

WILKES CENTRAL 3, HIBRITEN 1

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WEDNESDAY'S GAMES:

FREEDOM @ HIBRITEN
ALEXANDER CENTRAL @ STATESVILLE

FRIDAY'S GAMES:

WHS @ HICKORY
SOUTH CALDWELL @ ALEXANDER CENTRAL
WEST ROWAN @ ST. ST. STEPHENS
FRED T. FOARD @ HIBRITEN