Oh, what could have been.

The Watauga High baseball team wasted a marvelous pitching effort by senior Jake Watts on Friday night at Washam Field in Hickory. The Red Tornadoes chipped away against the righthander and pulled out a 2-0 victory that knocked WHS (7-3 overall; 3-2 in the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference) out of first place.

The loss drops WHS into a third-place tie with the Red Tornadoes, who have now beaten the Pioneers two consecutive times, dating back to the semifinal round of the conference tournament last spring in Grantie Falls. Watts (3-2), who threw 91 pitches, 61 for strikes, suffered his second loss of the year. He gave up two runs, one earned on five hits, he walked one and struck out ten.

His counterpart, senior Robert Whaley of the Red Tornadoes (7-4; 3-2) who will join the United States Navy after graduation later this spring, matched Watts pitch-for-pitch. The righthander, who picked up his first win of the year, and his first career win against the Pioneers, went the distance and threw 115 pitches.

And for a guy, who had a 6.36 earned-run-average in his only appearance against WHS before Friday's matchup, he did an excellent job frustrating the Pioneers. Whaley scattered five hits and walked four. But he also struck out ten men.

WHS aided his cause by leaving nine men on base; five in scoring position. The Pioneers also hit into a double play. And that double play was costly. Trailing 1-0 in the top of the fourth, the Pioneers, thanks to an infield single by David Martin and back-to-back walks to Tyler Jones and Matt Proffitt, loaded the bases with nobody out. But Garrison McGuire hit into a 5-2-3 double play that killed the rallied.

"We're really struggling with our hitting," said WHS coach Pete Hardee. "That's really a concern right now. We're not able to pull away from teams. We've had to rely on our pitching and defense a lot."

But Watauga's defense committed three errors Friday night, and two of them were costly. The first one occurred in the third inning with the game scoreless.

An errant pick-off throw by Watts allowed Zack Jarett (the son of former NASCAR driver Dale Jarett), who led off the inning with a single, to reach second base. He advanced to third on a ground ball and scored on Michael Payne's run-scoring two-out single.

The other miscue came in the fifth. Riley Mackie, who had two hits on the night, reached on a one-out single. He advanced to second base when Watts was called for a balk, and he scored when shortstop Max Linville dropped a routine pop fly off the bat of Payne with two outs.

Watauga's final threat came in the fifth. The Pioneers had the bases loaded with two outs. Martin coaxed an 11-pitch walk to load-up the bases, keeping the inning alive. But Whaley got Jones on a fly ball to centefield to close out the frame.

Making matters worse, South Caldwell, which began the night in a first-place tie with the

Pioneers, rallied from a 6-1 deficit and defeated Alexander Central 9-6 in nine innings. The Spartans (7-1; 4-1), who scored five runs with two outs in the sixth inning, scored eight runs with two outs during the course of the game. The win leaves South Caldwell in sole possession of first place.

Fred T. Foard moved into second place, one half-game behind the Spartans, as they defeated Hibriten 5-1.

"The good thing about this is that we're all bunched up in the middle," Hardee said. "But we've got to get our bats going. We work on our hitting every day. But lately, we just aren't getting the job done. It's very frustrating."

The Pioneers were scheduled to play at Providence on Saturday, but the game was rained out. No make up date has been announced. They return home to play St. Stephens on Tuesday night. Our coverage of that game begins at 6 pm on Oldies 100.7 FM.

NOTES: Catcher David Martin suffered a concussion during the sixth inning of Friday night's game. He was hit in the facemask by a foul ball off the bat of Barrett Miller of the Red Tornadoes. He stayed in the game, but according to head coach Pete Hardee, Martin went to see his family doctor Saturday morning. He will be out seven to ten days.....The Red Tornadoes have won three in a row.

NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONFERENCE STANDINGS:

SOUTH CALDWELL 4-1; 7-1
FRED T. FOARD 4-2; 6-4
HICKORY 3-2; 7-4
WATAUGA 3-2; 7-3
ALEXANDER CENTRAL 2-3; 3-7
ST. STEPHENS 1-4; 2-6
HIBRITEN 1-4; 2-8

FRIDAY NIGHT'S GAMES:

HICKORY 2, WATAUGA 0
SOUTH CALDWELL 9, ALEXANDER CENTRAL 6 (9 INNINGS)
FRED T. FOARD 5, HIBRITEN 1
WEST ROWAN 4, ST. STEPHENS 2 (13 INNINGS)

SATURDAY'S GAMES:

WATAUGA @ PROVIDENCE (RAINED OUT)

MONDAY'S GAMES:

FRED T. FOARD @ MAIDEN

TUESDAY'S GAMES

ST. STEPHENS @ WATAUGA
HICKORY @ SOUTH CALDWELL
ALEXANDER CENTRAL @ HIBRITEN