Written by Mike Kelly
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Watauga High junior Ethan Critcher did his best impersonation of Roy Hobbs on Thursday night.

Critcher had a career night. He went 3-3 with a double, two home runs, and drove in five runs, as the Pioneers battered Fred T. Foard 12-2 in five innings by the ten-run mercy rule. Critcher's three-run homer in a five-run third inning broke the game open as the Pioneers opened up a 9-1 lead.

"I really needed a night like this," Critcher said. "I've really been struggling at the plate. Confidence has been the issue. But tonight was really key, especially after that first at-bat with a double. I really felt comfortable in my second time up. I had a world of confidence stepping in the box. I'm real proud of that."

Critcher, who came into the game hitting .081 and was batting in the nine hole, is now 4-6 lifetime against the Tigers with two home runs, two doubles, three runs scored and five RBI.

The win also moves WHS (10-4 overall; 6-3 Northwestern 3A/4A Conference) just one game behind South Caldwell for first place in the NW3A/4A Conference standings. Ethan Greene made it stand up on the mound. The r ighthander, who has been Watauga's most consistent pitcher this season, went the distance, and despite giving up ten hits, he only gave up two earned runs, struck out six and didn't walk anyone.

"I didn't get a lot of chances to pltch last season," Greene said. "But I had a good off-season, especially last summer. Dylan (Norris) and Jake (Watts) have really been a big help to me. They gave me a lot of good advice on how to pitch at the varsity level."

The Tigers (6-9; 4-6), mired in a five-game losing streak, jumped on Greene for a 1-0 lead in the top of the first inning. After retired the first two batters he faced, the Tigers put together three consecutive singles----a scratch hit by Tyler Dickens, a bloop single that hugged the left-field line off the bat of Mitchell Henderson, and a run-scoring single by Justin Wike that scored Dickens.

"When you throw strikes, they're going to hit the ball," Greene said. "A lot of hitters will sit on a strike. It hurts me sometimes, but I want my defense to make plays behind me. It's worked for me, so far, and I'm going to keep doing it."

The Pioneers didn't waste any time jumpiing on top in their half of the first inning. Matt Proffitt had the big blow in the frame with a two-run double. The Pioneers added four more runs in the second inning, making it 6-1 as seven men came to the plate. The Pioneers scored in every inning except the fourth. And it was only fitting that Critcher closed out the affiar with a walk-off home run leading off the fifth inning that gave WHS a ten-run advantage.

"We knew he could hit," said WHS coach Pete Hardee, concerning Critcher's big offensive night. "He's just hit in tough luck this season. He's hit the ball hard, but it's either been right at someone, or they make a great play on him. But I was happy to him break through tonight like he did.

"And I'm real happy with how this team has bounced back. I really think tonight is turning point for us. We're having fun again. We're not pressing out there. And we're right in the teeth of a conference race. This was a big game for us, and our guys were ready. They came out tonight and took care of business."

Losing pitcher Kyle Yoder (2-2) was on the receiving end of WHS's assault. He coughed up nine runs, eight earned on eight hits in 2 1/3 innings of work. And the Pioneers are right back at it Friday night as Alexander Central comes to town. The Cougars, who defeated North Iredell 13-9 in a non-conference game Thursday night, begin the night in a two-way tie for third place with Hickory. Both teams are 5-4 in league play.

"I don't have to say much about this one," Hardee said. "Our guys know what's at stake, and they know Alexander Central is one of our biggest rivals. We"ll have Dylan (Norris) on the mound. He's one of our best. It's fun playing Alexander. I hope we can swing the bats as well as we did tonight, but it's a great atmosphere playing here at our new ball park, and it'll be an exciting game playing Alexander."

And because of threatening weather, Friday's game has been moved up to a 4:30 pm start. Our coverage begins at 4 pm on Oldies 100.7 FM.

NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONFERENCE STANDINGS:

SOUTH CALDWELL	7-2;	13-2
WATAUGA	**6-3;**	**10-4**
HICKORY	5-4;	11-6
ALEXANDER CENTRAL	5-4;	8-8
FRED T. FOARD	4-6;	6-9
ST. STEPHENS	3-7;	4-9
HIBRITEN	3-7;	5-12

THURSDAY'S GAMES:

WATAUGA 12, FRED T. FOARD 2 (5 INNINGS)
ALEXANDER CENTRAL 12, NORTH IREDELL 9

FRIDAY'S GAME'S:

ALEXANDER CENTRAL @ WATAUGA
FRED T. FOARD @ SOUTH CALDWELL
ST. STEPHENS @ HICKORY

SATURDAY'S GAMES:

PROVIDENCE @ WATAUGA (DH)

MEN'S TENNIS:

The WHS tennis team nailed down the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference title Thursday night as the Pioneers (13-4; 11-0 NW3A/4A) defeated Hibriten 9-0 down in Lenior. Steve Lake, Micheal Smith, Harrison Battle, Landon Taylor, Patrick O'Neal and Aaron Evans all posted victories in singles play. Lake and Smith, Battle and Taylor, O'Neal and Evans were victorious in doubles play. Cody Snyder and Ben Proffitt both won singles matches in exhibition play. The Pioneers wrap up conference play with a make-up match at Hickory on Monday. The NW3A/4A tournament will be played on Tuesday; the Pioneers wrap-up the regular season at Lake Norman next Thursday.

MEN'S GOLF:

The WHS men's golf team defeated Hibriten 323-328 in a non-conference match on Thursday at the Boone Golf Club. Noah Martin of Hibirten paced the field with a 76; Ben Beason paced WHS with a 78. Spencer Hodges had an 80. Cameron Taylor fired an 82, Trey McNeil had an 83, and Matt Byrum had an 88. The Pioneers wrap-up the regular season on Tuesday with a Northwestern 3A/4A Conference meet at the Boone Golf Club. Tee time is 2 pm. Hodges, McNeil and Beason are all vying to make regionals as individuals.