Written by Mike Kelly
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The Watauga High baseball team finds itself in quite a predicament.

The Pioneers, who began the season as one of the favorites to win the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference, now find themselves in a dogfight for the No.2 seed and the final playoff spot in league play. The Pioneers took a step backwards on Friday night as Alexander Central outscored WHS 13-10 in a wild game at Pioneer Field.

The win pulled Alexander Central (9-8 overall; 6-4 NW3A/4A) into a second-place tie with the Pioneers (10-5; 6-4) with two games left in conference play. The Cougars also snapped a five-game slide against WHS, and they defeated Dylan Norris first time in four tries.

"It's always exciting to play Alexander," said WHS coach Pete Hardee. "The atmosphere is great, and we've had some great battles over the years."

Alexander Central pounded out 17 hits, and like WHS did on Thursday night against Fred T. Foard, the Cougars scored in every inning but two. A seven-run explosion in third inning turned the game in Alexander Central's favor.

The Cougars sent 12 men to the plate, wiping out an early 5-1 deficit, to go up 8-5.

Norris, who was 3-0 with a 3.02 earned-run-average against the Cougars in his career (he also threw a no-hitter against them at the JV level), coughed up six runs, five earned in two innings of work. Norris finally left after coughing up five runs in the third without recording an out.

It was a frustrating night for the Pioneers, to say the least. Taylor Pennell, who hit for the cycle, had a run-scoring double in the first that gave Alexander Central an early 1-0 lead. But the Pioneers came charging back with five runs in the second. Winning pitcher Brennan James, who will attend UNC-Greensboro this fall, wasn't his usual self. The hard-throwing righthander hit four men, and only struck out four before he finally left in the sixth. He aided WHS's rally in the second inning by hitting two batters. Ethan Greene, who was sacrificing, reached on an error, loading the bases with one out.

Max Linville picked up WHS's first hit as he smacked a two-run double to left-center field that gave WHS a 2-1 lead. Ryan Turner came up next and belted his third home run of the year, a line drive that just cleared the short porch in left field for a 5-1 advantage. But it was all down hill from there for the Pioneers.

A two-run homer by Pennell in the fourth gave the Cougars a 10-5 lead; and a two-run triple by Pennell in the fifth made it 12-5. And the Cougars, who have won three in a row and six of their last seven games, did all their damage against four WHS pitchers.

Pennell, who duplicated what Ethan Critcher did for the Pioneers on Thursday night against Foard, drove in five runs. Appalachian State-signee Lukas LaSalle was 4-5 with four runs scored; freshman Tad Ratliff homered, doubled and drove in three runs; and Tyler McLain belted a two-run homer.

"You can't describe the intensity between our teams," Critcher said. "It's always very emotional to play them every year. It's a big rivalry, no doubt."

Trailing 13-5, Critcher and David Martin fueled a five-run rally by the Pioneers in the sixth. Critcher had a run-scoring double; Martin belted a two-run shot that got WHS within three. But Pennell came on in relief of James, and despite giving up four runs, finally shut the door on WHS.

"It's going to be an interesting finish," said WHS coach Pete Hardee. "It was nice to see the bats come alive, especially from different people. We had a good run against these guys, and Dylan had a big hand in it. But I really think how we (and South Caldwell) do against Alexander Central is going to determine how this thing is going to finish up. This league has really stepped up in recent weeks. Every game is going to be a battle, and we've got to be ready for it."

The Cougars travel to South Caldwell Tuesday night. The Pioneers take on Hickory Tuesday night at Pioneer Field. The Red Tornadoes, who had a chance to pull into a tie with the Pioneers and Alexander Central Friday night, dropped a 9-4 decision against St. Stephens. The loss leaves Hickory (11-7; 5-5) in fourth place.

The Red Tornadoes defeated WHS 2-0 behind Robert Whaley's five-hit shutout on March 25. Our coverage of that game begins at 6 pm Tuesday night on Oldies 100.7 FM.

NOTES: Saturday's scheduled double-header with Providence was rained out. It most likely will not be rescheduled....Tuesday night will be Youth Night at Pioneer Field. The event is sponsered by the Watauga High athletic department and the Watauga County Parks and Recreation Department. Any Watauga Parks and Recreation participants wearing their jersey will be admitted free of charge. For more information, please call the parks and recreation department at 264-9511, or you may email watco.parks@watgov.org . All others attending will be charged $5 each.....Alexander Central won the JV game 20-4.

NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONFERENCE STANDINGS:

SOUTH CALDWELL 8-2; 14-2
WATAUGA 6-4; 10-5
ALEXANDER CENTRAL 6-4; 9-8
HICKORY 5-5; 11-7
FRED T. FOARD 4-7; 6-10
ST. STEPHENS 4-7; 5-9
HIBRITEN 3-7; 5-12

FRIDAY NIGHT'S GAMES:

ALEXANDER CENTRAL 13, WATAUGA 10
SOUTH CALDWELL 18, FRED T. FOARD 2 (6 INNINGS)
ST. STEPHENS 9, HICKORY 4

SATURDAY'S GAMES:

PROVIDENCE @ WATAUGA (DH) RAINED OUT

TUESDAY'S GAMES:

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