The Watauga High baseball team captured its first Northwestern 3A/4A tournament championship in 11 years Saturday night.

And the Pioneers (16-7), who snapped a five-game losing streak in tournament championship games, wiped out an early 5-0 deficit and defeated South Caldwell 8-7 in eight innings at MS Deal Stadium in Granite Falls. The loss also broke South Caldwell's (21-3) run of six consecutive tournament titles. Ethan Greene of the Pioneers was named the Most Valuable Player.

"This is crazy, this is awesome," said WHS junior Max Linville, who belted a two-run double in the fifth inning that ignited WHS's comeback. "We just never gave up on ourselves. After David (Martin) hit that grand slam against Alexander Central (on Frfiday), we have so much confidence in ourselves."

But that confidence was put to the test as the Pioneers fell behind early. A lead-off home run by Blake Johnson, who was hitting .727 against WHS pitching, in the secohd inning, put South Caldwell on the board. And a two-run double by Gage Parham made it 3-0., and then the Pioneers self-destructed the third as they made two costly errors, handing the Spartans a pair of unearned runs and a 5-0 lead.

But the Pioneers, thanks to Linville's double in the fifth, highlighted a three-run rally that got WHS within 5-3. But the Spartans picked up an insurance run on Dylan Poarch's bloop single into right-center field in the bottom of the fifth that made it 6-3. A two-run double by Matt Proffitt in the top of the sixth made it 6-5. That set the stage for Clint Trivette in the seventh.

Tyler Jones reached on a throwing error by Parham to start the frame. He moved to second on a passed ball and went to third on Ethan Greene's ground ball to first. Trivette, who was hitless on the night, came up and blooped a single into short left-field that tied the game.

"I made a couple of terrible mistakes early in the game," said Trivette, a sure-handed first baseman, who made two errors in the third inning. "But I got in the box and had to make up for it in that last at bat. Oh man, we were suppose to be so good at the beginning of the season, and then we hit that rocky spot. We just had to keep scrapping, and look at what happened tonight. This is a big W."

Ironically, Linville, Proffitt and Trivette were a combined 0-8 before they complied their late-game heroics.

"Everyrthing went wrong, especially for me early in the game," said Proffitt, who got the starting nod and was touched up for five runs, but only three earned in three-plus innings of work. "I really struggled with my hitting and pitching, and our team was really struggling as well. But later in the game, we started gaining some confidence and that confidence finally came through."

The Pioneers finally jumped on top with a pair of runs in the eighth. A lead-off walk to Ryan Turner and a double by Linville put runners on second and third with nobody out. Proffitt and Josh Robertss, who walked three times, came through with back-to-back run-scoring singles for

an 8-6 lead.
"I told our coaching staff, 'it would be nice to get these guys, one, two, three,' but I knew it wasn't going to happen," said WHS coach Pete Hardee, who picked up his third tournament championship (and the only ones in school history). "This is always such an emotional game. South Caldwell has a great program, and Jeff (Parham) has done a tremendous job maintaining their great tradition here. I knew they would make one more run at us."
With two outs and runners on at first and second, the Spartans pulled off a double steal. Bryson Bowman stole third and scored on David Martin's throwing error (WHS's third miscue of the night). Travis Cook, who stole second, went to third on the play. Greene came on in relief of Jones and walked Blake Johnson intentionally. That put runners on first and third before Greene struck out Josh Murphy to end the game.
"The double steal was my idea," said South Caldwell Coach Jeff Parham. "They really weren't paying attention to Bryson, and I decided to send him. But give Pete and his kids credit. They have a solid program. They took advantage of our mistakes and took the game away from us."
The Spartans, uncharacteristically, walked nine men. Three of those walks came around to score.
"We just had too many walks," Parham said. "You can't do that against any team, especially a team as good as WHS, and expect to win the game. I really don't know what else to say. We were up 5-0, and I guess our guys put it on cruise control. Give WHS credit, they beat us."
Jones, who was yanked after facing just three batters against Alexander Central in Friday's semifinal game, picked up the win in relief. He was the third of four pitchers used by Hardee. The left-hander gave up an unearned run on one hit in just over an inning of work. Greene picked up his first save. And Jake Watts, who threw a shutout in the opening round against Hibriten on Wednesday, came on in the fourth and struck out four men in 2 2/3 innings of work.
"It was a pitching staff by committee tonight," Hardee said. "Our guys just sucked it up. The guys we put out there did a good job keeping us close. That really helped us."
The last time WHS won the conference tournanment was back in 2000. That team won 20 games and made it to the western semifinals before losing to Richmond County in extra innings.
"I hope we can do what those guys did, and go deep in the playoffs," Linville said. "We just had to go back to work. Coach was right when he said we were just throwing our jerseys out there expecting people to lay down. It was a matter of pride and playinjg blue-collar baseball, which Watauga is known for. But the last few games, we've been getting the job done, the best way we can."
The Pioneers will host a first-round state playoff game Friday night. The pairings will be announced Tuesday by the North Caroliona High School Athletic Association. All state playoff games will be carried on Oldies 100.7 FM.