

WHS Baseball, A Team Of Destiny

Written by Mike Kelly
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If you want something bad enough, you have to work for it.

The Watauga High baseball team did just that by capturing the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference tournament title Saturday night at MS Deal Stadium in Granite Falls. WHS wiped out an early 5-0 deficit and defeated South Caldwell 8-7 in eighth innings. Ethan Greene was named the Most Valuable Player.

Greene, in 7 1/3 innings of work, gave up no runs on four hits, he struck out seven and walked one in two relief appearances.

It was WHS's first tournament title in 11 years. The last time the Pioneers (16-7) won the crown, they defeated Freedom in Morganton way back in the 2000 season.

"I am so happy for these players," said WHS coach Pete Hardee, who captured his third tournament championship and the only ones in school history. "They've worked so hard this year, but it just seemed like nothing would go right. We got down, but at the easter tournament (at East Rutherford), we kinda pulled it together, and we re-discovered ourselves."

It was a just reward for a team that began the season ranked ninth in Class 4A by ImpactBaseball.com. And the Pioneers lived up to that billing as they simply destroyed A.C. Reynolds and North Davidson by a combined score of 22-5 to start the season. But the Pioneers began to stumble in the month of April. A 10-5 loss to South Caldwell (April 4), and a 13-10 setback against Alexander Central (April 15) had the Pioneers second-guessing themselves.

And that loss to Alexander Central also dropped WHS into fourth place in the NW3A/4A Conference standings. Gone were any hopes of a regular-season championship, and possibly even making the state playoffs.

"It was just a matter of believing in ourselves," Greene said. "We just had to keep fighting. We showed it tonight by beating South Caldwell to win the tournament. This is a quality win. They've got a real good hitting team, and beating them is gratifying."

And the Pioneers pulled off their conference championship in dramatic fashion. They wiped out a 3-0 deficit and beat Alexander Central in the semifinals on Friday; they staged a huge rally to beat South Caldwell in the finals on Saturday.

"This is fun," said WHS junior Max Linville, who had a pair of doubles in Saturday's win. "And it's poetic justice. We have some much confidence right now. Nothing could stop us. We got on a roll, and we started driving people in. That win against Alexander Central really made us believe in ourselves."

Linville, Matt Proffitt, Clint Trivette and Josh Roberts were the late-inning heroes. They delivered the big blows against the Spartans that turned the game in WHS's favor. After going a combined 0-8 with three walks, that group finished up with six hits and drove in seven runs.

"These guys have regained the respect for this program," Hardee said. "That's one thing about this team, they're resilient. They've fought through the bad times and kept playing hard. Sure, I was worried when we fell behind like we did, but I told them 'this is a tournament and crazy things can happen.' We just kept working and put ourselves in a position to win the game, and they delivered."

The win snapped WHS's five-game losing streak in tournament championship games; it also

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snapped South Caldwell's (21-3) run of six consecutive tournament titles. As a matter of fact, the Spartans haven't lost a championship game since 2004, when they were victimized by Alexander Central in Boone. Ironically, Madison Bumgarner, now with the San Francisco Giants, was a freshman on that team.

"This is a marathon not a sprint," Hardee said. "There's going to be games where things aren't going to go your way. But this team held together. We were fortunate to win (Friday) against Alexander (Central), and gain the No.2 seed in the state playoffs. And tonight, we beat an excellent South Caldwell team right in their own back yard. And that's a huge accomplishment for this program and a big reward for our players."

And hopefully, the key to a successful run in the state playoffs.

The Pioneers will host a first-round state playoff game Friday night. The pairings will be announced Tuesday by the North Carolina High School Athletic Association. All state playoff games will be carried live on Oldies 100.7 FM.