The Watauga High baseball team didn't waste any time winning its first state playoff game in three years.

The Pioneers (17-7), fresh off their championship run in the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference tournament, blasted Olympic 11-1 at Smith Stadium/Beaver Field on the campus of Appalachian State University in the opening round of the Class 4A state playoffs. The game was called in the fifth inning because of the ten-run mercy rule.

It was WHS's first win in the state playoffs since 2008. And the Pioneers, riding a six-game winning streak, took control right away. They scored four times in the first inning, thanks to a pair of two-run triples by Matt Proffitt and Tyler Jones.

"The big thing was that we jumped on them early," said Jones, who 2-4 and reached base three times. "We scored some runs on them early, and we took control of the game."

That jack-rabbit start held up thanks to Jake Watts, who picked up his eighth win of the year. Watts, who had a 0.44 earned-run-average in his last three appearances, went the distance. He coughed up an earned run (he's given up just two runs in his last 21 2/3 innings of work), scattered five hits and struck out five.

"Jake just keeps getting stronger as the game goes on," said WHS coach Pete Hardee. "He gets into a groove and it's hard to hit him. He's throwing the ball hard. He's been in the 90's (miles-a-hour range) a couple of times. I don't think he was there tonight, but he was certainly in the upper 80's. He's got great control of his curve ball, and he's back to the Jake Watts we had last year that you could count on day in and day out."

The Trojans (9-16) scored their only run in the third inning. Jamie Dye and Matt Wall, who had two hits each, reached on back-to-back singles. Chase Shuford brought them home with a two-out, run-scoring single. But the Pioneers, who pounded out 15 hits, finally put the game away with by scoring three times in the bottom of third. David Martin came through with a two out, two-run double to highlight the frame. It was a clutch hit by Martin, especially after the Pioneers left the bases loaded in the second inning and came away empty.

"It was frustrating the last two years, losing in the first round." Jones said. "We remembered what happened last season (a first-round loss to East Gaston), and we worked very hard the last 365 days to get here today. We took care of business today, and we're moving on to the second round."

And the Pioneers have rejuvinated their offense. For a team that was struggling to score runs just a few weeks ago, they've re-discovered themselves at the plate. The Pioneers have scored 25 runs in their last three games. In Thursday's first-round playoff game, Martin had two hits, including a double, and drove in two runs; Ryan Turner had three hits, Mix Linville had three

hits, a double, scored twice and drove in two runs.
"It's just a matter of confidence," Jones said. "We're going up there with the mindset of getting on base. We refuse to be an easy out. We're going to battle up there, and make it hard as possible on the other team."
The win moves WHS into a second-round match-up with Alexander Central Tuesday night. The Cougars (14-11) advanced by beating Lake Norman 7-2 Thursday night in Mooresville. It will be the fourth meeting between the schools this season.
"Here we go again, 'The Back Yard Brawl No.4,'" Hardee said with a chuckle. "But both of us got there by beating Charlotte schools. And that says a lot about our conference. I've said it all year, this is a competitive league. I'm not surprised at all that we're meeting them in the next round."
The Pioneers will play at home Tuesday night, but a starting time and a location for that second-round game are still up in the air.

THURSDAY NIGHT'S GAMES:

CLASS 4A: WATAUGA 11, OLYMPIC 1 (5 INNINGS)

CLASS 4A: ALEXANDER CENTRAL 7, LAKE NORMAN 2

CLASS 3A: LAWNDALE BURNS 10, ST. STEPHENS 3

FRIDAY'S GAMES:

CLASS 4A: MOORESVILLE @ SOUTH CALDWELL

CLASS 3A: PATTON @ HICKORY

CLASS 3A: FRED T. FOARD @ WEST HENDERSON