Written by Mike Kelly
Tuesday, 17 May 2011 08:17

Jake Watts is full of surprises.

The Watauga High senior, who came on late last season and has established himself as the ace of the pitching staff, took his talents a step further on Monday. The right-hander went 3-3 and drove in a career-high five runs as the Pioneers, riding a seven-game winning streak, blasted Alexander Central 16-6 in the second round of the Class 4A state playoffs. The game was called in the sixth inning because of the ten-run mercy rule.

The Pioneers scored in every inning except the first. The Cougars (14-12), who lost for the seventh time in their last eight meetings against the Pioneers, aided the cause by committing six errors. WHS jumped out to a 5-0 lead in the second inning, thanks to three Alexander Central errors (ironically, the Pioneers made four errors themselves in the game).

And despite a four-run rally in the third, highlighted by Brennan James' three-run double, the Pioneers were never seriously threatened. A four-run fifth inning gave WHS a 12-6 lead in the fifth, and four more runs in the sixth put the game on ice.

And it was only fitting that Watts, who picked up his ninth win of the year in relief of Ethan Greene, ended the game with a base hit to right field that scored Tyler Jones from third with the decisive run.

"I just got lucky tonight," Watts said in a modest tone. "They threw me fastballs, and I just went up there swinging as hard as I could."

A modest statement to say the least. But in reality, Watts had only one official at bat this season before he turned in his most productive night offensively as a member of the Pioneers. And it came in the biggest game of the year.

"He asked me before his first at bat, 'Do you want me to take coach?' and I told him, 'son, tonight you're swinging away,'" said WHS coach Pete Hardee. "That first ball he hit, I thought it was out. He made good contact up there, and hit the ball hard. It was his night."

The win moves WHS (18-7) into the Western Quarterfinals for the first time since 2008. The Pioneers will play either Porter Ridge (the No.1 seed from the Southern Carolina Conference) or East Gaston (the No.2 seed from the MEGA 7 Conference). Those teams were scheduled to play each other Tuesday night.

And the Pioneers, who pounded out a season-high 16 hits, also received their most productive game from the lower part of the batting order.

The No.6 through nine hitters were a combined 10-16 (.626 batting average) with eight runs scored and six RBI. Jones was 2-4 with a walk, three runs scored and an RBI; Ethan Critcher was 3-4 with a walk and three runs scored. And Greene had a double, walked and scored a run in his two plate appearances.

"Everyone in our lineup is starting to hit," Hardee said. "It makes a difference having those guys down there producing. Early in the conference season, we weren't getting that. If the top six guys in our lineup didn't produce, we didn't score. But now, with these guys coming through, it

allows our big hitters to relax more at the plate. They don't have go up there looking for the home run, or the big hit all the time."

Another shot in the arm has been the emergence of junior David Martin, who has re-discovered his stroke at the plate. Since moving into the lead-off spot, Martin, who was hitting .208 when the move was made, is now batting .264.

"And we haven't lost since we moved him to lead-off," Hardee said. "Daniel Clark (WHS's Media Relations Director) gets a lot of credit for that. We found out through his statistics that David was a much better hitter with nobody on base. And moving him to lead-off has given him a chance to see a lot of pitches. The move has also paid off for Max (Linville). He's really settled in batting third."

Martin was 3-4 with a pair of doubles, three runs scored, a stolen base and an RBI against the Cougars; Linville was 2-5 with two runs scored and a stolen base.

"(Alexander Central) is always a tough team," Watts said. "We really respect those guys. They're great hitters, and they can light things up in a hurry. But beating them tonight is a good win for us."

The Pioneers are scheduled to play Friday night, weather permitting. The contest will be carried on Oldies 100.7 FM.