He's seen it all before. The hoopla, the high expectations, the anticipation of what could be. But Ryder Jones, a senior at Watauga High, who signed his National Letter of Intent to play baseball at Stanford University, a Division I school in Palo-Alto, CA., and a member of the Pacific 12 Conference, isn't phased by it at all.

He knows what lies ahead---a career in baseball that could land him in the Major Leagues one day. But for right now, Jones is content on just enjoying his senior year in high school.

"The (MLB) draft is still a ways off (in June)," he said. "We'll focus on that when the time comes. I'm just glad to be signing with Stanford, and my focus now is to just get stronger, and to be ready when the high school season begins (in late February)."

And Jones will join a WHS team that was hit very hard by graduation. The Pioneers lost a superb senior class, led by right hander Ethan Greene (Pfeiffer University), that won 16 games and made it to the second round of the North Carolina High School Association Class 4A state playoffs.

"Ryder gives us a huge boost on the mound," said WHS coach Pete Hardee. "When you have that one guy a week that can give you a shot at winning one conference game a week, and then you can scrap after the other one with Tyler Jones (WHS' No.2 man in the rotation this coming season), we're going to be all right."

But Jones, who will be WHS' starting pitcher on opening day, will take the mound with great expectations, ironically, the same way Steven Duquay did in his debut with the Pioneers in 2001 (a 4-1 complete-game win at South Caldwell that season. The Pioneers and Spartans were not conference opponents that year).

"He's use to it," said Billy Jones, Ryder's father and the new baseball coach at Appalachian State University. "He been through this for the majority of his life. The people he's encountered, the situations he's been in, he has the confidence about himself that you need in this game. But he also understands himself.

"He knows you can't be too high or too low; he believes in his abilities and those traits set him apart from other people. He just doesn't panic very much."

Jones showed off his moxie last spring as he backboned his old school, Stillwater (OK) High, to the state playoffs for the first time since 2005. Jones is a power pitcher that can also play third base and shortstop. He throws right and bats left, and he can with power. And playing shortstop is a position he hopes to master at Stanford.

"He's pretty stuck on it," said Billy Jones. "He wants to be a shortstop. And a few weeks ago in Florida, he proved to a lot of people that he could stay there. He's gotten bigger and taller, and he's gotten more athletic."

Another advantage is having a father, who is also a college coach.

"I never pressured either of my boys to play," Billy Jones said. "I told them to play the game and compete, but when it comes time that you like the game, then you come to me and we'll do it. Ryder was 14 or 15 (years old) when he came to me and said, 'I want to do this for real.'"

"My dad was pretty hard on me at first," Ryder Jones said. "It's gotten easier, but I've learned a lot being around him. It's nice seeing and knowing what you're getting into. I've matured, and I've developed a very good work ethic being around him."

And the Pioneers are hoping that work ethic can carry them to a conference championship---something they haven't done the last two years. Jones might be just what WHS needs to overtake South Caldwell
for the conference crown.
"This reminds when Steven Duquay joined our team," Hardee said. "But this team is better than that one. We're a little thin, but I'm confident that we have the people that can help Ryder out. He's a guy we're definitely counting on, but there shouldn't be any pressure on him at all."
"Stanford is a good fit for me," Jones said. "It gives me a chance to play for a quality program, and to compete for a national championship every year (the Cardinal lost to Florida State in regionals last year). But I still have the high school season to look forward to here. I just want to get stronger, and I hope we can put together a strong playoff run."

Hardee and the Pioneers are hoping those ambitions come true.

Photo Courtesy: Ryder Jones, PHOTO SUBMITTED