

WHS Continues To Struggle

Written by Mike Kelly

Saturday, 23 March 2013 12:50

For Watauga High baseball coach Pete Hardee, it's seems to be a recurring dream. The Pioneers (2-7 overall; 1-4 Northwestern 3A/4A Conference) just keep finding ways to lose.

And no matter what the veteran skipper does, it just doesn't seem to work. The Pioneers committed four costly errors Friday night. They coughed up three unearned runs, and in turn, wasted a marvelous effort by Ryder Jones in a 3-1 loss to Hibriten at Hagaman Field in Lenior, N.C. Jones, a right hander, went the distance, scattered five hits and struck out eight. But a throwing error by right fielder Jesse Illich in the first inning, an error by second baseman Andrew Miller in the third, and a throwing error by shortstop Utah Jones in the sixth, plated three runs, giving the Panthers their first win against WHS in seven tries since the schools became NW3A/4A Conference foes in 2009-10. "We just had a few more breaks than they did tonight," said Hibriten coach Terry Henthorne. "We should really still be playing. (Ryder) Jones is a pretty good pitcher. We just wanted to go deep in the count against him. We wanted him to make a lot of pitches. And we wanted to put the bat on the ball, something we haven't done in recent games." The Panthers (4-4; 2-3) also snapped a three-game losing streak, and now find themselves in a four-way tie for third place with Hickory, Fred T. Foard and St. Stephens. The loss knocks WHS into last place. It's the first time the Pioneers have been mired in last place this deep in the season since 2002 (the Pioneers finished last that year with a 3-7 record in the old NW4A Conference, but reached the conference finals before they lost to Alexander Central). "It's frustrating," Hardee said. "We're just making too many mistakes, and they're coming at critical times in the game. I really thought Ryder pitched well enough to win tonight. But we let him down offensively and defensively." Left hander Jon Curtis (3-1) held the Pioneers in check. He gave up one run, unearned, scattered two hits, walked one and struck out ten. He now has 55 strikeouts in four league appearances, and Curtis is making a strong argument for Pitcher of the Year honors in the NW3A/4A. "That guy is nasty," Hardee said. "I was watching him warm up, and I knew runs were going to be tough to get. He does a good job moving the ball around. He really kept us off balance. We hit the ball pretty well a couple of times against him, but the guy never got rattled. He shut us down when he had to." The Pioneers left three men on base, two in scoring position. Leading 1-0, Curtis pitched out of a jam in the third. Jesse Illich led off the frame with a double to left field. He moved to third on a wild pitch with nobody out. But Curtis got Utah Jones on a pop fly to first, and he struck out Chance Richards and Tyler Jones to end the inning. "He's been through episodes like this before," Henthorne said. "He knows what to do. And it's been a tough week for him. Jon lost his grandfather on Thursday right before practice, and our guys rallied around him. Jon is a humble kid. He's really worked hard, and he's made himself a good high school pitcher." Curtis has attracted interest from Brevard College, UNC-Asheville, and Catawba Valley Community College, which according to Henthorne, "would love to have him." But the Pioneers finally broke through in the fourth. Ryder Jones led off with a single, moved to second on a walk to Mason Illich, and he reached third on a fielder's choice by Tyler Sturgill. Jones eventually scored on a throwing error by catcher Dylan Hamel. Tripp Taylor, a courtesy runner for Sturgill at first, stole second base. Hamel's throw sailed into center field and Jones scored easily from third. Taylor raced to third on the play. That made it, 2-1. But with the tying run just 90-feet away with one out, Curtis struck out designated

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hitter Clay Mizner and he retired Carson Isaacs on a ground ball to second base to end the inning. WHS never threatened again. Curtis retired nine of the last ten men he faced, five of those by strike out. Mason Illich reached on a two-out error in the sixth, but was stranded at first base. Ryder Jones (1-2) wasn't too shabby, either. The right hander retired eight men in a row during one stretch (between the third through the sixth innings). Carson Poarch snapped the streak with a one-out single in the sixth. And that single handed Hibriten a much-needed insurance run. Poarch left the game after he was hit in the shoulder by Jones on a pick-off attempt sliding back into the bag at first. Jordan Sherrill came on as a pinch runner. Sherrill moved to second base on a throwing error by Sturgill, and he scored one out later, on Utah Jones' throwing error on a tough play between second and third. Jones ran the ball down moving to his left, but his throw skipped by Chance Richards at first as Grayam Austin reached safely on the play. The throw sailed into foul territory allowing Sherrill to score all the way from second base for a 3-1 lead. "It was a tough play," Hardee said. "But we're not getting the breaks right now. And we seem to run into the other team's ace pitcher every Friday night. But that's no excuse. We've got to find some answers pretty quick. And we've got to keep working. There's nothing else we can do." Saturday's scheduled game with Charlotte-Providence was rained out. It's been rescheduled for Saturday, April 13. The Pioneers, who haven't played a home game all year, will be on the road again Tuesday night when they venture to St. Stephens. Coverage begins at 6 p.m., on Classic Hits 100.7 FM.

NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONFERENCE
FRIDAY'S GAMES HIBRITEN 3, WATAUGA 1 HICKORY 3, ST. STEPHENS 2 SOUTH CALDWELL 2, ALEXANDER CENTRAL 1 FRED T. FOARD - BYE

NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A STANDINGS SOUTH CALDWELL 5-1; 6-2 ALEXANDER CENTRAL 4-1; 9-1 ST. STEPHENS 2-3; 5-3 HICKORY 2-3; 6-4 HIBRITEN 2-3; 4-4 FRED T. FOARD 2-3; 4-5 WATAUGA 1-4; 2-7