

Pioneers Smack Down R.S. Central

Written by Mike Kelly
Friday, 05 April 2013 22:06

Well, it finally happened. Following a first half filled with frustration and disappointment, the Watauga High baseball team might be ready to turn its fortunes around. The Pioneers (4-9) put together their first winning streak of the season by knocking off R.S. Central 8-1 Friday in the fifth-place game of the East Rutherford Easter

Tournament at McNair Field in Forest City, N.C.

And a pair of seniors played a huge role in WHS' lopsided win. Ryder Jones put together his best game of the season at the plate by going 3-4 with a double, a home run, three runs-batted-in, two runs scored, two stolen bases and a walk. Left hander Tripp Taylor (2-0) went four innings, scattered three hits, walked two and struck out four. Taylor leads the WHS pitching staff in wins.

"Ryder did what I expected him to do when he joined us last fall," WHS coach Pete Hardee said. "He has the talent to dominate a game, and today he did just that. Tripp was very strong today. He did a great job on the mound. He did a good job pitching out of trouble in the first couple of innings. And he got stronger from there.

"We could have gone with him longer, but I wanted to give Ryder and Utah (Jones) some innings on the mound. Tripp threw a great game."

With the Pioneers to top, 5-0, Taylor pitched out of a bases-loaded, one out jam in the first, and he left runners at second and third in the second inning. That preserved the shutout, and the Pioneers were well on their way.

"It feels great to finally string some wins together," Ryder Jones said. "It's been a frustrating year. We just weren't scoring runs. But with coach shaking up the line up like he has, we're starting to get guys on base. We're not chirping at each other in the dug out. We're just starting to hit the ball, and I'm really feeling more comfortable at the plate."

The Pioneers, like they did on Wednesday against Gaston Christian (which didn't bother to show up for its seventh-place game against Chase), score three times in the first inning. Jesse Illich got things started with a lead-off walk. Tyler Jones walked, and both men moved up 90 feet on a throwing error by left fielder Zach Norville.

Illich scored WHS' first run on a wild pitch, Mason Illich drove in Tyler Jones with an RBI single, and Ryder Jones, who walked, came home when Mason Illich stole second base. Losing pitcher Jordan Hendrix only faced four batters and gave up three earned runs. The Pioneers added two more runs in the second on a two-run double by Ryder Jones for a 5-0 lead.

"I like batting lead-off," said Jesse Illich. "You see more fast balls in that spot, and I like swinging at the first pitch. Batting sixth or seventh, you might see one fast ball in your at bat. You'll see more breaking balls. I never batted lead-off before, but I had an idea of what to expect. It's my job to get on base."

Illich, who was 1-5, got on base three times and he scored two runs.

"Jesse has really been hitting the ball well for us all year," Hardee said. "That's why I moved him to lead-off. Some guys don't adjust well when you move them into a new spot in the batting order. But Jesse has really settled in there. It's also helped Tyler (Jones). It takes pressure off him batting lead-off."

"I like it," Tyler Jones said. "Jesse is doing a great job getting on base, and we're scoring runs."

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And I love batting second right now, because if he gets on, it's my job to move him around, or to drive in a run. And Ryder is coming up (batting third). What ever works."

The new line up has produced 18 runs and 18 hits in WHS' last two games. The Pioneers also took advantage of four walks, three hit batters, and five errors by the Hilltoppers. R.S. Central (9-5), which began the year by winning eight in the row. has lost five of its last six games.

Ryder Jones made it 7-0 by blasting his team-leading fourth home run of the year with one out in the fourth. The Pioneers added another run thanks to a hit batsman, a scratch hit, a double steal and a throwing error by catcher Tyler Morgan.

Ryder Jones took over in the fifth and allowed R.S. Central's only run thanks to a pair of walks, a scratch hit and a wild pitch. Utah Jones finished up with two scoreless innings in the sixth and the seventh.

"I haven't pitched in a while (March 15 at Hibriten)," Ryder Jones said. "I was struggling with my location, and I was overthrowing a little bit. I wasn't that loose. I was a little frustrated, but I got us out of the inning."

Jones got Conner Daily on a line drive to second base, and he struck out Garen Murray to end the fourth inning.

Tyler Jones was 1-4 with a run scored; Mason Illich was 1-3 with an RBI and a stolen base; Carson Isaacs was 2-3. The Pioneers, who have posted three consecutive fifth-place finishes at this tournament, won their third straight against the Hilltoppers. WHS is 6-3 at the East Rutherford Easter Tournament.

And the Pioneers hope to carry this momentum into Tuesday night's match up against Hickory. The Pioneers, who begin second-half play in last place in the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference, will have Ryder Jones on the mound. Jones blanked Hickory 6-0 in the conference opener back on March 8. That was also WHS' first win of the season.

"I still feel we can be a factor in the conference race," Hardee said. "We just have to be more consistent. And with this line up change, we've been pretty productive on offense. We're just doing all we can to score runs, and in the last two games, we've done that."

Coverage of Tuesday's game (scheduled to be played at Pioneer Field) begins at 6 p.m., on Classic Hits 100.7 FM.

NOTES: The Pioneers, who were averaging three errors a game coming into tournament play, made only two errors in three tournament games.....WHS has lost nine games this season by the narrow margin of 13 runs---an average of 1.4 runs a game. WHS has lost five one-run games, and twice in extra innings....Tripp Taylor dropped his earned-run-average to 4.27. As a team, the Pioneers are boasting a stingy 2.37 ERA....Ryder Jones was 6-11 (.545) in the tournament with two home runs, a triple and five RBI. Jones is batting .365 on the year with four home runs and a team-leading 15 RBI.

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NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONFERENCE

FRIDAY'S GAMES

EAST RUTHERFORD EASTER TOURNAMENT

WATAUGA 8, R.S. CENTRAL 1 (FIFTH PLACE)

SOUTH CALDWELL 14, EAST RUTHERFORD JV 0 (THIRD PLACE)

EAST RUTHERFORD 10, ALEXANDER CENTRAL 5 (CHAMPIONSHIP GAME)

OTHER GAMES

HIBRITEN 12, EAST BURKE 1

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