

Pioneers Win Fourth Straight

Written by Mike Kelly
Friday, 19 April 2013 08:31

The Watuaga High baseball team is red hot at the moment. The Pioneers (9-10 overall; 4-5 Northwestern 3A/4A Conference) won their season-high fourth game in a row Thursday night as they knocked off South Caldwell 3-2 at Pioneer Field. It's also the second time in three days that the Pioneers have beaten a first-place team.

WHS, which has won seven of its last eight games, knocked Alexander Central out of first place Tuesday night; the Pioneers followed that up by dropping South Caldwell (11-8; 8-3) into a first-place tie with the Cougars on Thursday. The Spartans will play the Cougars in Taylorsville, N.C., Tuesday night for the regular-season championship.

Thursday's win also pulls WHS into a third-place tie with Hickory in the NW3A/4A Conference standings. And the Pioneers own the tie-breaker because they beat Hickory twice in the regular season. St. Stephens, which began the night in third place, lost to Fred T. Foard, 5-2. The Indians and the Tigers are tied for fifth. Fred T. Foard plays WHS on Saturday.

"It's big beating two first place teams in a row," said WHS senior Tripp Taylor, who picked up his third win of the season. "We're playing with a lot of confidence right now. It's a lot of fun. Everything is coming together at the right time."

Ryder Jones got the start Thursday night. He tossed two scoreless innings before he departed with a stiff right arm. The bullpen took over from there. Andrew Miller, Taylor and Hunter Isaacs limited South Caldwell to three hits. The only blemish, a two-run homer to Nick Horning in the third that gave the Spartans a short-lived 2-1 lead.

"The key tonight, we didn't let their lead-off hitter get on base," said WHS coach Pete Hardee. "That was important for us. If they get on base, or if you make an error down the stretch, they know how to take advantage of it. It ignites a rally."

Hunter Isaacs had another stellar outing on the mound. The right hander, who picked up his first varsity win Tuesday against the Cougars, picked up his first career save against the Spartans. Carson Isaacs closed things out as he made a diving catch at third on Isaac Tilghman's vicious line drive to end the game.

"My defense has really helped me out," Isaacs said. "And I'm thankful coach Hardee believes in me. He's given me an opportunity. My arm was a little tired, but I just had to work through it. We're on a roll right now. We've turned our season around."

"I have a lot of confidence in Isaacs," Hardee said. "I wasn't real worried about his pitch count because he only threw 68 pitches Tuesday night (against Alexander Central). Hunter is a lot like (Ethan Greene, now a freshman at Pfeiffer University). He doesn't throw a lot of pitches because he has good control and he throws strikes. I had my mind made up before the game that I was going to close with Hunter tonight."

Tyler Jones tied the game with his first career home run in the fifth. Ryder Jones reached when Horning misplayed his fly ball in center field for a double. And with Jones on second base, Mason Illich drove him in with a two-out, RBI single for a 3-2 lead. Taylor and Isaacs took over from there.

"Ryder told me before the game that his arm had tightened up during warm ups," Hardee said. "He told me he could give me two innings tonight. From there, it was up to our bullpen, and those guys came through. They got a lot of work in last weekend against Providence and it paid off tonight."

Taylor (3-1) tossed two-plus scoreless innings and gave up a hit; Isaacs retired all five men he faced with a strikeout. Isaacs has given up just two earned runs in 11 innings this season (1.27

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earned run average).

"It's nice, we have a lot of confidence right now," Hardee said. "Ryder told me in the fifth inning, and I was intense in the dugout, 'coach, we got you.' And he took control of the huddle after the game. He thanked those bullpen guys that had his back tonight. Ryder's a smart pitcher knowing not to push himself with a sore arm. It was an unselfish move on his part, and we played a great game tonight."

The Pioneers will play a varsity-only double header on Saturday at Smith Stadium/Beaver Field at Appalachian State Univeristy. The Pioneers will play Fred T. Foard at 12 noon, and they will take on A.C. Reynolds in a non-conference game following their match up with the Tigers. Coverage begins at 11:30 p.m., on Classic Hits 100.7 FM.

NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONFERENCE

THURSDAY'S GAMES

WATAUGA 3, SOUTH CALDWELL 2

FRED T. FOARD 5, ST. STEPHENS 2

ALEXANDER CENTRAL 8, WEST WILKES 6

FRIDAY'S GAMES

HIBRITEN @ HICKORY

NW3A/4A CONFERENCE STANDINGS

SOUTH CALDWELL 8-3; 11-8

ALEXANDER CENTRAL 8-3; 16-4

WATAUGA 4-5; 9-10

HICKORY 4-5; 9-7

ST. STEPHENS 4-6; 10-6

FRED T. FOARD 4-6; 8-9

HIBRITEN 3-6; 10-7