The Watauga High baseball team made its final regular-season game at Watauga High-Field a memorable one on Friday night.

They rallied from a 5-0 deficit and defeated St. Stephens 9-8 in 13 innings. The marathon affair lasted three hours and 50 minutes. And the Pioneers, who survived what would have been a disappointing loss, scored five runs in the bottom of the seventh inning, thanks to four consecutive errors by the Indians, a wild pitch, a balk and two walks to tie the game.. The Pioneers, riding an eight-game winning streak (their longest since the 2000 season), only made one hit in the frame.

The meltdown also ruined a great effort by pitcher Cade Vance. The right-hander, how had a no-hitter through three innings, scattered five hits through 6 2/3 innings before things fell apart.

“It was a crazy game, what more can I say,” said WHS coach Pete Hardee. “Our guys just kept battling and found a way to win. I can’t explain it any other way. This group has been blessed with a lot of determination.”

And the Pioneers (16-8 overall; 10-2) were loaded with comebacks Friday night. Following that five-run rally in the seventh, the Pioneers, who won back-to-back conference titles for the first time since 1998 and 1999 (in the old Northwestern 4A Conference), came charging back to tie the game with two runs in the eighth.

Trailing 7-5 with one out, Max Linville, who homered twice in this game, hits a solo shot that made it 7-6. Then Josh Roberts hits a controversial inside-the-park home run that ties the game at seven. Initially, it looked like Indians right-fielder Ryan Gant made a running catch on Roberts deep fly ball to right-center field, but according to Hardee, it looked like he dropped the ball.

"From where I was, I saw it hit the ground, " he said. "That's why we kept sending Josh around the bases. I don't really think it was a catch, because after (Gant) hit the ground, he didn't come up right away. . It was a tough call, but it went our way."

A heated discussion ensued following the play and St. Stephens coach Chip Watts was removed from the game. But the Indians, (7-12; 2-10), riding a fouir-game losing streak, took the lead again in the 12 th.

Jacob Hoyle, who burned WHS for four hits, including three doubles, scored on a wild pitch by Cal Hardee that gave St. Stephens an 8-7 lead. But with two outs in the bottom of the inning, Linville hits his team-leading sixth home run of the year to tie it up at eight.

"I worked real hard on my hitting during the off-season," said Linville. "I wasn't expecting this kind of power. But the ball is just flying off my bat when I make contact. It's great winning this game. Winning the conference championship, when no one gave us a chance, is real special."

WHS finally won it in the 13th on Matt Proffitt's two-out single to right-center field. Josh Wyant was hit by a pitch to start the frame and advanced to second base on a slow roller to the first-base side of the mound by Baker Stanley. That set the stage for Proffitt's heroics.

"I just made good contact.," Proffitt said. "But I knew we had the game won, especially with Linville on deck. We never doubted ourselves in this game. We've been through this before. Go back to the South Cadlwell game (on April 13, 11-10 win in eight innings). We just kept coming back in that game. We're use to this."

The Pioneers had their backs against the wall, especially after South Caldwell rallied with two runs in the bottom of the sixth and beat Hickory 5-4 down in Sawmills. If the Pioneers lost, South Caldwell would have won the conference championship.

“That wasn’t going to happen on our field,” Linville said. “I am so happy that we won this game for the seniors (Hardee and Wyant). They’ve been such great leaders for us.”

“Now, we can go into the conference tournament next weekend with a lot of confidence and momentum.”

The NW3A/4A Conference Tournament begins Tuesday night with the higher seeds hosting first-round games. The Pioneers won’t play until Friday in the semi-final round at MS Deal Stadium in Granite Falls, NC.

“I like playing there,” Hardee said. “It’s a great stadium, and a great baseball atmosphere. Winning this game, like we did, was huge for us. I am very confident in this group. There’s still a lot of baseball left to play.”

The brackets will be released Saturday night. We will post them on goblueridge.net as soon as possible.

NOTES: Alexander Central nailed down the No.3 seed by defeating Hibriten 6-1 in Lenior.