

Pioneers fall, lose No.1 seed

Written by Mike Kelly
Friday, 07 May 2010 02:50

The Watauga High baseball team suffered a huge setback Thursday night in the semi-final round of the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference Tournament.

The Pioneers (16-9) blew an early 3-0 lead and lost to Hickory 8-5 at MS Deal Stadium in Granite Falls, NC. The loss snapped Watauga's eight-game winning streak (its longest since 2000) and it also cost WHS the No.1 seed in the state playoffs. South Caldwell, which lost the tie-breaker and received the No.2 seed in regular-season play, took advantage of the situation by beating St. Stephens 3-2 in Thursday night's second semi-final game.

Blake Johnson's solo home run in the bottom of the sixth sealed Watauga's fate. With the win, the Spartans (20-4) move into Friday's championship game against the Red Tornadoes (16-9). And regardless what happens in Friday night's match-up, the Spartans will receive the No.1 seed in the state playoffs when the brackets are released. They will open post-season play at home against a wildcard team. The Spartans have also won five tournament championships in a row.

For WHS, the Pioneers receive the No.2 seed and will open post-season play on the road in Charlotte against the No.1 seed from the MEGA 7 3A/4A Conference.

A four-run rally in the fourth inning, backboned by three home runs including a two-run shot by winning pitcher Tyler Barnette, gave Hickory a 4-3 lead. That explosion came against starting pitcher Cal Hardee, who had retired nine men in a row after he yielded a lead-off walk to Robert Whaley to start the game.

The Pioneers, thanks to a walk, a hit batsman, a run-scoring single by Josh Wyant and a wild pitch that scored a run, recaptured a 5-4 lead in the bottom of the fourth. But Barnette, who was

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3-4 with three RBI, helped his own cause with a run-producing single in the fifth that tied the game at 5; and Robert Whaley put WHS out of its misery with a two-out, two-run triple in the sixth that gave Hickory a 7-5 lead.

Dylan Norris, the second of three pitchers utilized by WHS coach Pete Hardee, suffered the loss. He coughed up four runs, all earned, in 2-plus innings of work. Barnette, ironically the man Norris nosed out for Pitcher of the Year honors in the NW3A/4A Conference, went the distance and got the win.

The right-hander struck out 12, but he had his anxious moments. He walked four men, one intentionally, and he hit three batters (Max Linville of the Pioneers got plunked twice). But he buckled down and only allowed an infield single and a walk in his last three innings of work.

The Pioneers, who had played in two consecutive tournament championship games, missed the finals for the first time since 2007. The state playoff pairings will be announced next Tuesday, May 11. The state playoffs begin next Friday, May 14.

NOTES: St. Stephens will play Hibriten to decide the final playoff spot in the Class 3A division. That game begins at 4:30 pm Friday afternoon.

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