

Martin's Power, Greene's Precision Lead WHS To Victory

Written by Mike Kelly
Friday, 06 May 2011 22:12

The Watauga High baseball team marched its way into the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference tournament championship game by knocking off Alexander Central Friday night.

The Pioneers, who spotted the Cougars a 3-0 first-inning lead, came charging back to beat Alexander Central 6-3 at MS Deal Stadium in Granite Falls, NC. A grand slam by David Martin---the third grand slam the Pioneer (15-7) have hit this season---highlighted a six-run rally in the fourth inning. Martin crushed an Brennan James offering over the right-center field fence, 401 feet away. The Pioneers sent 11 men to the plate in the frame.

The win moves WHS into the championship game Saturday night. The Pioneers, making their third appearance in the finals in four years, take on South Caldwell in the title game at 7 pm. South Caldwell (21-2) advanced by blowing out Fred T. Foard 14-4 in six innings.

The win also gives WHS the No.2 seed in the NW3A/4A Conference and a home game in the opening round of the state playoffs, which begin on Friday, May 13.

"I never saw it leave the yard," Martin said. "I knew I hit it good, but this is a big ball park. I was running hard trying to get at least a triple out of it. But then I heard someone say to slow down. The ball left the yard, and I was fortunate to help our team in that situation."

And while Martin took care of things offensively, Ethan Greene took care of things on the mound. The right-hander, who came on in relief of stater Tyler Jones in the first inning, held the Cougars (13-11) in check. Greene pitched a shutout for seven innings. He scattered four hits, walked one and struck out six. Alexander Central's biggest threat came in the fifth with runners at second and third with two outs. But second baseman Ryan Turner made an outstanding play snaring Tyler McLain's ground ball in the short outfield grass to end the inning.

"Tyler is a bulldog," Martin said. "He just attacked their hitters, and kept them off balance. The guy did all he could to keep us in the game, especially after the way things started."

And things didn't start very well for the Pioneers. Jones faced three men and they all reached. A run-scoring double by Lukas LaSalle, who will play at Appalachian State next season, gave the Cougars an early 1-0 lead. That also opened the door for Greene.

"Give Greenie a lot of credit," said WHS coach Pete Hardee. "He threw some before the game, but I don't think he was really loose when he came in. But the guy just did a great job. He starts the game in right field, and is probably concentrating on how he's going to help the team hitting-wise. And then all of sudden, he's rushed to the mound before things even got settled in. But he responded and got the job done."

The win also avenges an earlier loss to the Cougars. Alexander Central snapped a five-game losing streak against the Pioneers by winning a 13-10 slug-fest at Pioneer Field on April 15. The Cougars pounded out 17 hits and Taylor Pennell hit for the cycle. And coming into Friday's game, LaSalle was hitting a whopping .786 against the Pioneers in his career.

"They're a great hitting team," Greene said. "All their hitters can hurt you. There isn't an easy out in their lineup. But his is a big rivalry game for us. And beating them, especially with the number two seed on the line, is real special. Now we can host a game in the state playoffs."

And the Pioneers, who are making their ninth appearance in a conference championship game, haven't won the conference tournament since 2000. South Caldwell, on the other hand, has won this tournament six consecutive times. And two of those wins came against the Pioneers

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(in 2008 and in 2009).

"Our guys are playing for tradition right now," Hardee said. "For a while there, we were just throwing our jerseys out there and thinking it was going to win games for us. But we've gotten our workman-attitude back. This team is playing for something. We got the No.2 seed tonight, and now we want to win the conference tournament."

Our coverage of the NW3A/4A Conference championship game begins at 6:30 pm on Oldies 100.7 FM.

FRIDAY'S GAMES:

WATAUGA 6, ALEXANDER CENTRAL 3

SOUTH CALDWELL 14, FRED T. FOARD 4 (6 INNINGS)

SATURDAY'S CHAMPIONSHIP GAME:

WATAUGA v. SOUTH CALDWELL □ 7 PM