

Pioneers Continue Their Hot Pace

Written by Mike Kelly

Saturday, 28 April 2012 13:08

The Watauga High baseball team wrapped up regular-season play with a 7-0 win against St. Stephens Friday night in a Northwestern 3A/4A Conference game on Senior Night at Watauga High Field. And the Pioneers (10-2 NW3A/4A; 14-7 overall), who wrapped up regular-season play on a six-game winning streak (including

eight straight in league play), finally broke the game open with a three-run third inning. And it was the seniors, who played a huge role in Friday night's win.

Corey Belden's two-run single in the bottom of the third gave WHS a 3-0 lead and put the Pioneers on top to stay; and winning pitcher Matt Proffitt, who carried WHS into the sixth inning for his fifth win of the year, also helped his own cause with two hits, including a double, two sacrifice flies, and three runs-batted-in.

Proffitt (5-1) gave up five hits, struck out six, walked two and hit a batter. Ethan Greene came on with two innings of scoreless relief to wrap things up.

"It's always special to pitch at home," Proffitt said. "But with it being Senior Night, it made this a real special game. We're confident and we know we have the talent to go far in the playoffs. We're starting to click together right now. Early in the year, we weren't driving people in, but now, we're placing the ball where it needs to go. We're producing, and everything is working out."

It was a fitting way for this senior group (12 in all) to go out. The Pioneers, who were the pre-season favorites to win the NW3A/4A conference, have become one of the hottest teams in the league heading into the conference tournament. WHS, the No.2 seed, takes on Fred T. Foard (1-11; 5-17), the No.7 seed, in a first-round game Tuesday night at home.

"And (Foard) always seems to play us tough," Proffitt said. "For some reason, they just seem to make the great plays against us. We beat them twice (15-5 in Boone and 11-5 in Newton), but it was a challenge both times. We just have to go in ready to play"

"You've got to win the first game to win the conference tournament," said WHS coach Pete Hardee. "That's why we're going to go with Greenie (Ethan Greene) in the first round. I know (Foard) has struggled this season (the Tigers have dropped ten of their last 11 games), but we still have to win that game to advance."

The Pioneers didn't have any problems beating a struggling team Friday night. The Indians (10-10; 5-7) have lost eight of their last ten games. And the woes continued against the Pioneers. WHS finally put the game out of reach with a three-run rally in the seventh. David Martin with an RBI double, Proffitt's sacrifice fly to center field, and Clint Trivette's seeing-eye, run-scoring single up the middle closed out the scoring.

The Pioneers have beaten St. Stephens six times in last their seven meetings. They're unbeaten in four tries at home against the Indians.

"Our confidence level is very high right now," Belden said. "Just like last year, we got things going after the Easter tournament (in Forest City). We've caught a spark, we're starting to play up to our true potential, and we're winning games. And we're not going to overlook Foard Tuesday night. We don't care what their record is. We just have to come out like we did tonight, and win the game."

And unlike last season, the Pioneers, who were struggling at this time a year ago, are playing

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their best baseball of the season. The Pioneers are averaging nearly eight runs a game in their last four outings. That includes an 11-3 win against regular-season champion South Caldwell on April 20 at home.

"I feel we're on a roll and we're playing good baseball right now," Hardee said. "I think we're a tough draw for anybody right now. We just have to keep it going, and we got a taste of what it's like to win that tournament last year. We just want to go back and try to get it done again."

The Pioneers defeated South Caldwell in the tournament finals last year, snapping the Spartans' (19-2; 11-1) six-year reign as tournament champions. And the Pioneers, who have won three tournament titles in school history (1999, 2000 and last season) haven't won back-to-back titles in 12 years.

"I like that do-or-die situation to move on," Hardee said. "I like to see how our guys react to it. That conference tournament gets you ready for the state playoffs, and it got us ready last year (as WHS reached the sectional finals). But we've got to win that first game to advance. And I'm real confident in this group, especially our seniors. They're a great group of guys, and it gets pretty bitter-sweet at this time of the year. Tonight was a special night; it was like saying good-bye to 12 sons. But we're not ready to end the season just yet."

The Pioneers entertain Fred T. Foard Tuesday night at 7 p.m. in the opening round of the NW3A/4A Conference Tournament. Ethan Greene will be on the mound. Our coverage begins at 6:30 p.m. on Oldies 100.7 FM. The conference semifinals and finals will be played at MSDeal Stadium in Granite Falls Friday and Saturday. The other first-round match ups Tuesday night finds Hickory, the No.3 seed, entertaining Alexander Central, the No. 6 seed, and Hibriten taking on St. Stephens. The Indians and Panthers finished the season in a fourth-place tie.

NOTES: St. Stephens defeated WHS 5-1 in the JV game.....Greene has given up just one earned run in his last 25 2/3 innings of work for a 0.28 ERA.....Max Linnville, hampered by a hamstring injury, struck out in a pinch-hitting appearance in the fifth inning. The Pioneers hope to have him back Tuesday night.

NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONFERENCE

SOUTH CALDWELL 11-1; 19-2
WATAUGA 10-2; 14-7
HICKORY 7-5; 16-6

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ST. STEPHENS 5-7; 10-10
HIBRITEN 5-7; 8-12
ALEXANDER CENTRAL 3-9; 9-13
FRED T. FOARD 1-11; 5-17

FRIDAY NIGHT'S GAMES

WATAUGA 7, ST. STEPHENS 0
HICKORY 10, FRED T. FOARD 1
ALEXANDER CENTRAL 8, HIBRITEN 7
SOUTH CALDWELL - BYE

SATURDAY'S GAMES

SOUTH CALDWELL @ DRAUGHN

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