

Pioneers Upset Bid Comes Up Short

Written by Mike Kelly

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Life just isn't fair at times. That was evident Wednesday night as the T.C. Roberson High baseball team (26-2), ranked No.1 in the state in Class 4A by Impactbaseball.com and nationally ranked by ESPN and MaxPreps.com, squeaked by Watauga 3-2

in nine innings at Smith-Holmes Field in the second round of the state playoffs in Asheville, N.C. Ned Hulseman's scratch hit with a runners at second and third and two outs in the bottom of the ninth plated Brad Ellis with the winning run.

"Ned was the first one out here today after class at 1:30 this afternoon hitting off the tee," said TCR coach Eric Filipek. "And good things happen to those type of kids that work. We didn't guarantee him anything. He had to earn his starting job at second base as a senior, but he worked his tail off to get it. And that attitude exemplifies the character of our program."

It's the second time in less than a week that the Rams have staved off elimination. They wiped out a two-run deficit Friday night against Hopewell in the opening round of the state playoffs, and last night, they found a way to beat the Pioneers (16-9) with their best pitcher on the mound.

Ethan Greene (7-3), who suffered the loss in relief, replaced starter Matt Proffitt with the bases loaded and one out in the first inning. He induced a double-play ball to end the inning and was in complete control from that point on.

"Pfeiffer (University) got a steal when they got that (Greene)," Filipek said. "He was unhittable. And he wouldn't give in. That's what makes him so tough. He moves the ball around, and makes you chase his pitches. Even when we got that runner to third with nobody out in the ninth, I wasn't sure we were going to score. He was just that good."

Greene went 8 1/3 innings and gave up a run on four hits with eight strikeouts and a walk. And he displayed his moxie in the ninth inning with the game on the line. Ellis led off with a scratch hit, swiped second base and went to third on a throwing error by catcher David Martin. But with a runner at third and nobody out, Greene proceeded to strike out the next two hitters.

"We knew they were good," said winning pitcher Parker Johnson. "They're always good. Watauga has good players, and they were loaded with seniors this year. And everybody talks about where were ranked and all that stuff. But it doesn't mean a thing. You still have to play baseball."

The Rams were ranked 44th in the nation by ESPN early Wednesday afternoon, just hours before their match up against WHS.

"Being ranked sucks," Filipek said. "It really sucks. It puts a lot of pressure on your team, and a big bullseye on your back. Believe me, with all this twitter stuff going around, and these guys are teen-agers, and if you start believing you're that good, this game will humble you quick.

"And people say we're ranked here and there. But what about Watauga. Why aren't they ranked? They've got an excellent team, and they played a heck of a game tonight. It was a tough way for them to go out. No one should have lost this game."

The Pioneers left 12 men on base, including six in scoring position. They also left the bases loaded in the fourth and fifth innings.

"Our kids played hard, I'm proud of them," said WHS coach Pete Hardee. "I'm so glad I got to coach them. It was a tough way to go out. We just couldn't take advantage of our opportunities,

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but we faced some great pitching tonight. But it was a fun group to go to war with." The Rams made four errors that handed WHS a pair of unearned runs. The biggest miscue occurred in the fifth inning. With the Rams leading 2-1, the Pioneers put runners at first and third with two outs, Tyler Jones, who drove in WHS' first run with an RBI single in the first inning, hit a sharp ground to third that Ellis fielded cleanly. But his throw pulled first baseman Brackston Davidson off the bag. That allowed Jones to reach safely, and it allowed Ryan Turner, who walked with one out, to score from third with the tying run.

And from that point on, it turned into a pitching dual between Johnson (8-1) and Greene. "I'm just glad I got the win," Johnson said. "(Greene) was nasty. He really frustrated us at the plate. He wasn't overpowering, but he did a great job keeping us off balance. He really painted the outside corner on us all night."

Johnson, who struck out the side in the seventh, gave up an unearned run on one hit with seven strikeouts in five innings. But he walked four men and hit a batter. Davidson was TCR's most productive hitter going 2-4. His two-run homer in the first inning gave the Rams a 2-1 lead. The Pioneers only made four hits; the Rams made six.

The Rams will play Mallard Creek at home in the sectional finals Friday night. Mallard Creek advanced by knocking off Lake Norman 7-1 Wednesday night.

NOTES: TCR coach Eric Filipek was an assistant coach at Western Carolina University for four years. He also was the coach that recruited Jonah Greene of the Pioneers.....Greene, who has been in the Texas Rangers minor-league system since 2008, has retired. He played with the Class AA Frisco Roughriders of the Texas League last season.....The Pioneers are losing 12 seniors to graduation. That group produced 51 wins, a Northwestern 3A/4A Conference championship in 2010, and led WHS to the Class 4A sectional finals last year.....Greene was 11-6 with two saves the last two years.