

Mountaineers Rally Late, Win SoCon Title

Written by Mike Flynn
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Trailing 4-0 in the top of the ninth inning, No. 24 Appalachian State University rallied for five runs and pulled off a stunning 5-4 victory over Western Carolina on Friday evening that clinched the Mountaineers' first Southern Conference championship in 25 years. Appalachian's heart-stopping win combined with second-place College of Charleston's 10-8 loss at UNC

Greensboro gave the Mountaineers no less than a share of their first conference title since 1987 and sixth SoCon championship overall. By virtue of taking 2-of-3 games from Charleston (36-18, 20-9 SoCon) in April, Appalachian (38-13, 21-8 SoCon) wins the tiebreaker should it lose and CofC win in tomorrow's regular-season finales. The top-seeded Mountaineers will open SoCon Tournament action on Wednesday at 5 p.m. versus No. 8-seeded Furman at Flour Field in Greenville, S.C.

For much of the night, the story was WCU starter Morgan McKinney, who shut the Mountaineers out for eight innings before Trey Holmes (Rockwell, N.C./East Rowan) led off the ninth with a single up the middle. The leadoff base hit chased McKinney from the ballgame and brought on Western closer Preston Hatcher, who had thrown 37 pitches earlier in the day to finish off the Catamounts' 8-6 win over ASU in a game that was suspended due to rain on Thursday evening.

Hatcher's second outing in less than six hours started well enough when he got Preston Troutman (Rockwell, N.C./East Rowan) to fly out to the warning track in right field for the first out of the inning. However, true freshman pinch-hitter Alex Leach (Charlotte, N.C./Ardrey Kell) followed with a sharp single to left and Western Carolina left fielder Garrett Brown — a ninth-inning defensive replacement — made the first of WCU's three errors in the ninth inning to put ASU runners on second and third with only one out.

From there, things really got interesting when Hector Crespo (Miami, Fla./Florida Christian) hit a tapper back to the mound that was misplayed by Hatcher, allowing the Mountaineers to load the bases. Tyler Zupcic (Charlotte, N.C./Providence) followed with a high chopper up the first-base line that WCU could do nothing with, allowing the Apps to plate their first run of the game at cut the deficit to 4-1. Will Callaway (Greenville, S.C./Eastside) then singled to right field on a 1-2 pitch to bring the Mountaineers within two at 4-2. From there, things really got wacky, as Hatcher was wild twice in the span of four pitches. Hatcher's first wild pitch, combined with a throwing error by catcher Adam Martin, allowed both Crespo and Zupcic to score to knot the ballgame at 4-4. Two pitches later, Hatcher sent another ball to the backstop and Callaway came home from third with the go-ahead run.

Head coach Chris Pollard brought closer Nathan Hyatt (Brevard, N.C./Brevard) on in the ninth to finish off the victory but Hyatt made it interesting when he walked WCU leadoff hitter Aaron Attaway to start the bottom of the ninth. Hyatt easily retired the next two hitters he faced but walked cleanup batter Tyler White on an extremely close 3-2 pitch to put the tying run in scoring position with two outs. However, Hyatt struck pinch-hitter Luke Gragg out looking on just three pitches to clinch the SoCon title and set off a spirited celebration by the Mountaineers on their archrivals' home field.

Appalachian State starter Seth Grant (Etowah, N.C./West Henderson) turned in his third-straight impressive start on the mound, allowing just one earned run over seven innings but, as has

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been the case in each of his last four starts, did not figure in the decision. Ryne Frankoff (Apex, N.C./Apex) allowed one run on one hit in the eighth to earn the win and move to 2-1 on the campaign. Hyatt worked the ninth to pick up his Appalachian-record 14th save of the season. Zupcic led the Mountaineers' 12-hit attack by going 3-for-5 with a double, RBI and run scored. Trey Holmes and Brandon Burris (Concord, N.C./Mount Pleasant) paced the Apps with two RBI apiece. With the SoCon title already in hand, Appalachian closes the regular season with a three-game series rubber match versus WCU on Saturday at 1 p.m.

Photo Courtesy: ASU Baseball Team, ASU Athletics