

Pioneers Continue To Struggle

Written by Mike Kelly
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Watauga High baseball coach Pete Hardee has seen it all. The good times and the bad. In recent years (2008-12), Hardee's teams have put together 84 wins, five straight playoff appearances, two

Northwestern 3A/4A Conference titles, and a trip to the Class 4A sectional championship game (in 2011).

And he's also gone through his share of struggles. And the 2013 edition of the Pioneers is struggling at the moment. WHS (0-3 overall; 0-1 NW3A/4A) suffered its most-recent setback Thursday night with an 8-5 loss to Fred T. Foard in the NW3A/4A Conference opener for both teams in Newton, N.C.

It's the first time the Tigers (3-1; 1-0) have beaten WHS in school history (they're 1-7 against the Pioneers dating back to 2009-10). And it's also the first time since 2002 that the Pioneers have lost their conference opener (they lost to South Caldwell that season in the old Northwestern 4A Conference).

"We lost a very good group to graduation," Hardee said. "We had 12 quality seniors last season. But this is a good group. We've got some good players that can get the job done. We just have to shore up some things, and it's still early."

A three-run rally by the Tigers in the fifth inning doomed WHS. Leading 5-4, losing pitcher Chance Richards (0-1) issued a lead-off walk to Matt Ward. And it all went downhill from there. Consecutive singles by Carson Bryant and Chris Mays, and an error by second baseman Utah Jones, plated three runs and gave Fred T. Foard a 7-5 lead.

And winning pitcher Tyler Dickens of the Tigers, who came on in relief in the fifth, made it stand up. Dickens only gave up one hit (a lead-off double by Utah Jones in the sixth) and he struck out four.

"I tip my hat to their pitchers," Hardee said. "Dickens and (Jordan) Fulbright threw it well tonight. We really struggled at the plate. It was a tough game. They got some timely hits, and they made the plays when they had to. We had our chances to win the game, and couldn't do it."

The Pioneers left five men on base, four in scoring position and lost a base runner. Dickens also hurt the Pioneers at the plate. He was 4-4 with a pair of doubles, a home run, four runs scored and a run-batted-in. The Tigers made 12 hits, and they also took advantage of three WHS errors.

In turn, the Pioneers only made seven hits, and they struck out 14 times. Fulbright, who got the starting nod, struck out ten men in his four innings of work. The Pioneers have struck out a whopping 25 times in their last two games.

"I'm not making excuses," Hardee said, "but we don't have an indoor facility right now, and it's really hurting us. It still feels like winter time to me. It's been a frustrating time for us. We've got to find a way to start swinging the bats and get better."

The Pioneers scored their first run of the game on a throwing error by Fulbright in the first inning that gave the Pioneers an early 1-0 lead. They scored their second run, thanks to Jesse Illich, who reached on an error in the second inning, stole second base, went to third on a passed ball and scored on a wild pitch. That effort tied the game at 2-2.

Trailing 3-2 in the fourth, WHS grabbed its first lead of the game thanks to a three-run

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explosion. The Tigers lent a helping hand by committing two errors in the inning. Tyler Jones, who got the starting nod on the mound, also drove in his first run of the year with a double into left-center field. That blow scored courtesy runner Alex Parsons from second base for a 5-3 lead.

The fourth inning was also WHS' most productive inning of the game as the Pioneers scored three runs on three hits.

Tyler Jones was 1-3 with a double and an RBI on the night; Mason Illich was 2-4 with two stolen bases and a run scored; Tyler Sturgill had a double in four trips; Jesse Illich was 1-3 with two stolen bases and Utah Jones was 1-3.

"We can't start feeling sorry for ourselves," Hardee said. "We just have to put this one behind us and get ready for Hickory (tonight)."

The Pioneers travel to Hickory this evening. The game originally scheduled as a home game for the Pioneers, but Tuesday's winter storm forced a change of venues. Ryder Jones (0-0) will make his second start of the season. Coverage begins at 6 p.m. on Classic Hits 100;7 FM.