

Cougars Edge Pioneers, 3-2

Written by Mike Kelly
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It was a game the Watauga High baseball team wasn't meant to win. The Pioneers fought their way back from a 2-0 deficit only to lose 3-2 Friday night in a Northwestern 3A/4A Conference game in Taylorsville, N.C. The Pioneers (1-5

overall; 1-2 NW3A/4A) dropped their second game in a row, and their fourth one-run decision of the season.

An error by third baseman Carson Isaacs on a hot smash off the bat of Josh McClain, that bounced off his chest with runners at first and third, plated the winning run with two outs in the bottom of the seventh.

"We just aren't winning the close games," said WHS coach Pete Hardee. "Last year, we were pulling these games out. But that's not the case this season. We're struggling to score runs. But I'm proud of my guys. We gave Alexander Central (the first place team in the conference) all it could handle."

Ryder Jones (1-1), who labored at times, went the distance and suffered the loss. But despite his struggles, the right hander scattered five hits and matched his season high with 13 strikeouts.

"Ryder wasn't throwing all that hard tonight," Hardee said. "But he battled through it and kept us in the game. And that's all you can ask from your pitcher. He kept us close."

Jones pitched out of a huge jam in the third, thanks to his defense. Leading 1-0, the Cougars (8-0; 4-0) had runners on second and third with nobody out. But two great defensive plays---one by catcher Tyler Sturgill on a passed ball that cut down a runner at the plate, and a diving catch in right field by Jesse Illich---bailed him out.

Jones coughed up a run in the fourth on an RBI single by Garrett Dupuis that made it 2-0. Dillon Dessicker tried to score from second base on the play, but center fielder Tyler Jones cut down him at the plate to end the inning.

"Our defense was sharp tonight," Hardee said. "We made some big plays in the field. It was a great effort by our guys. We just couldn't pull it out. Games like this are tough to take."

The Pioneers finally got on the board in the fifth. Utah Jones doubled to lead off the frame, he went to third on a wild pitch and he scored on Clay Mizner's run-scoring single. The Pioneers tied it in the seventh with an unearned run.

Isaacs reached on an error, was sacrificed to second base by Jesse Illich and he moved to third on a fielder's choice by Mizner. Chance Richards came through with a eye-seeing double that hugged the left-field line. Left fielder Trevor Cook nearly made a diving catch on the play, but smothered the ball, instead. Isaacs scored easily from third to tie the game.

"That was a big hit by Chance," Hardee said. "He really delivered in the clutch. But we hit in some hard luck tonight. Carson hit a line drive in the (fourth inning), but it was right at the third baseman. When you're having a season like we are right now, those things happen."

Tad Ratliff got the starting nod for Alexander Central and he retired the first nine men he faced. But Ratliff, who is 3-2 lifetime against WHS, and 2-0 at home against the Pioneers, began to struggle in the fourth. Trailing 1-0 in the top of the fourth, the Pioneers had the tying run at second base with one out, but couldn't score. Ryder Jones hits a looping liner to third, and Isaacs lined out to end the inning.

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"Ratliff has always been tough on us, especially here," Hardee said. "But we finally broke through against him. It was a well played game. Unfortunately, we came up short. But we can't dwell on it. We've got to get ready for Mount Tabor (Saturday)."

Ratliff, who had a no-decision, went 6.1 innings and gave up two runs, one earned, on four hits with six strikeouts. Luke Watts (2-0), who came on in relief in the seventh, picked up the win. Following Richards' bloop double, he intentionally walked Tyler Jones before he retired Mason Illich on a fielder's choice to end the threat. McClain made a great play in the hole at short to bail him out. McClain cut down Jones at second base to end the inning.

"That's why (McClain) is going to North Carolina State," Hardee said. "That wasn't an easy play. He cut down a fast runner in Jones. He made a great play to get out of the inning."

Tyler Jones paced WHS offensively, going 2-3 with a stolen base. The Pioneers travel to Winston-Salem Saturday afternoon to play a non-conference game at Mount Tabor. It's the second meeting this season between the schools. The Spartans (1-4) defeated WHS 3-2 in Winston-Salem on February 28. The Spartans have won two in a row against the Pioneers. But Mount Tabor has lost three straight since beating WHS. The Spartans dropped a 5-0 decision to Kernersville-Glenn Thursday night. Coverage begins at 1:30 p.m. on Classic Hits 100.7 FM

NOTES: WHS (1-2) won the JV game 8-2 for its first win of the season.....Friday's loss snapped WHS' four-game winning streak against the Cougars.