

WHS Extends Winning Streak with DH Sweep

Written by Mike Kelly

Saturday, 20 April 2013 21:07

The Watauga High baseball team just keeps rolling along. The Pioneers (11-10 overall; 5-5 Northwestern 3A/4A Conference) had a record-setting day on Saturday in game one of their double header in a 24-9 win against Fred T. Foard. The Pioneers got a gutsy pitching performance from senior Chance Richards in a 3-2 win against

A.C. Reynolds in game two.

The end result, the Pioneers have won six in a row, and they're over .500 for the first time this season. The Pioneers also move into sole possession of third place in the NW3A/4A Conference following Saturday's win against the Tigers.

"A lot of people have asked me why would I play a double header against two different teams," WHS coach Pete Hardee said. "I'm just trying to pick up as many wins as I can to secure a wildcard spot to make the state playoffs. We just hit the heck out of (the ball) in that first game. Some people may think we ran it up on Foard, but our guys were in a groove in that first game. Chance came through with a great effort in game two. Our bullpen was spent and he gave us a complete game."

In game one, WHS pounded out a school record 24 runs, and a school record 22 hits against the Tigers. The Pioneers put the contest out of reach with a school-record 12 runs in the third inning. Sixteen men batted in the frame.

Tyler Sturgill and Ryder Jones etched their names into the record book as well. Sturgill and Jones each had a grand slam in the lopsided win. The Pioneers have never hit two grand slams in the same game. Josh Roberts was the last Pioneer to hit a grand slam. He did it against St. Stephens in 2011 at Pioneer Field.

Sturgill belted his first career grand slam, and his third home run of the year, in a four-run second inning. That blow wiped out a 5-4 deficit and put WHS on top to stay. Ryder Jones hit his first grand slam with the Pioneers, and his team-leading eighth home run of the year, to settle the issue in the fourth.

The game was called after 4 1/2 innings because of the ten-run mercy rule. The win also avenged an 8-5 loss on March 7 (the Tigers' first and only win against WHS in nine tries). The loss also snapped the Tigers' (8-10; 4-7) modest two-game winning streak, and dropped them into sixth place.

"It's really important to win these games," Sturgill said. "we're trying to make the state playoffs, and we've got to win every game we can. We're trying to secure the wildcard just in case we don't win the conference tournament. It's really nice to be on a winning streak like this. It was so frustrating at the beginning of the season. But we've bounced back and this winning streak has been a blast."

The Pioneers batted around and built a 4-0 first-inning lead. But the Tigers responded with five runs of their own in the top of the second. Four of those runs were unearned. But WHS took control of the game, thanks to Sturgill's blast. Leading 8-6, WHS erupted for 12 runs on 11 hits in the third inning and built a commanding 20-6 lead.

"It's nice to have a school record like that," Sturgill said concerning the grand slams. "The (losing pitcher Josh Wike) threw me a slider and it didn't slide. It felt great when it left the bat. I knew it was gone."

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Sturgill was 3-5 with five RBI; Ryder Jones was 5-5 with two doubles a grand slam and six RBI; Tyler Jones was 2-3 with a triple, four RBI, and five runs scored. Andrew Miller (2-2), the third pitcher used by the Pioneers, went two innings and picked up the win.

In game two, Richards (2-2) tossed his second complete game of the year. He gave up two runs, one earned, on seven hits with a walk and six strikeouts. He also hit two batters. Richards secured the win by pitching his way out of numerous jams throughout the afternoon.

He left two men on in the fourth as he struck out the side; he left the tying run on third in the seventh as he retired Jacob Cagle on a pop fly and Dustin Owenby on a ground ball to second base to end the game.

"I got a little nervous in the seventh," Richards said. "But (Matt) Lambert made a great play running down that pop up in foul territory, and I was trying to keep the ball in the infield. I got myself in a couple of those jams, but I'm glad coach Hardee stuck with me."

"(Chance) has some bulldog in him," Hardee said. "You can't really tell it because he's pretty quiet. But he's not afraid to challenge hitters. He did a good job getting out of trouble today. I wasn't really expecting him to go seven innings, but he carried us in that second game. We've used a lot of pitchers this week and we need to rest those guys."

The Pioneers handed Richards a 2-0 lead in the first inning. Losing pitcher Parker Utter, who left the game after the first inning, coughed up five consecutive hits. Ryder Jones and Mason Illich had RBI singles in the inning. Ryder Jones had seven RBI on the day. He now has 31 RBI on the year, four shy of the school record. John Greene set the single-season school record for home runs (11) and RBI (35) in 2004.

The Rockets (13-5), who have lost two in a row, narrowed the gap on Bryce Hensley's run-scoring double in the second inning. But the Pioneers, who left seven men on base, five in scoring position and lost a runner, added an insurance run in the fourth on a run-scoring fielder's choice by Jesse Illich. The Pioneers scored that run without the benefit of a base hit. A lead-off walk to Utah Jones and an error by center fielder Cory Watts put runners at first and third with nobody out. Illich beat out a potential inning-ending double-play ball to score Utah Jones for a 3-1 lead.

The Rockets made it 3-2 with a run in the top of the fifth. Richards was the victim of his own demise. A hit batsman, a walk, and a throwing error by Richards put runners at first and third with nobody out. John Nick Setterland, who was 2-3 on the day with a run scored and a stolen base, made it 3-2 with an RBI single.

But Utah Jones turned an odd double play to end the inning. He ran down Trevor Stockhausen's pop fly on a blown hit-and-run play, and he doubled off Setterland, who had wandered too far off the bag, at first base.

"I have a good defense behind me," Richards said. "I don't have to worry about the ball being hit hard, because the guys behind me can make plays. I haven't pitched in a while because of my knee. That's why I hit a couple of guys today. But I thought the fourth inning was the turning point today. They had two guys on with nobody out, and I used my curve ball to get out of it. It allowed me to get ahead on the count, and they started chasing pitches."

Richards lowered his earned-run-average to 2.48 on the year. He's given up 12 earned runs in 34 innings.

"And Chance is still nursing a knee injury he suffered at practice (on April 2)," Hardee said. "He made a few mistakes today, but they really weren't getting that many good swings against him today. I felt confident he could get out of the jams he got in. He was real effective today, and I felt with this being his senior year, he really deserves a big win like this."

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The Pioneers wrap up the regular season with three games this week. It all begins Tuesday night at home against Hibriten. Coverage begins at 6 p.m., on Classic Hits 100.7 FM.