

Pioneers Blast Panthers, Win Seventh Straight

Written by Mike Kelly

Wednesday, 24 April 2013 07:32

The Watauga High baseball team clinched third place in the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference Tuesday night by knocking off Hibriten 12-2 at Pioneer Field. The game was called in 4 1/2 innings because of the ten-run mercy rule. It was WHS' second lopsided win in three days. The Pioneers blasted Fred T. Foard 24-9 on Saturday.

And like they did on Saturday, the Pioneers broke the game open by scoring 11 runs in the bottom of the third. That explosion fell one run shy of tying the school record of 12 runs in an inning set on Saturday against the Tigers. And the Pioneers (12-10 overall; 6-5 NW3A/4A), who haven't lost since they dropped a 2-1 decision to the East Rutherford JV team on April 1, have won seven straight and 10 of their last 11 games.

"We hit rock bottom when we lost that game," said WHS coach Pete Hardee. "But we've bounced back. Our guys have put in the work, that's why we've been so successful during this run. They come to practice with a great attitude every day. It's a great group to be around. I am so proud of them for what they've done. It was a business-like effort tonight and we capitalized on their mistakes."

Hunter Isaacs (2-0) got the starting nod, and despite giving up two walks in the first inning (the first two walks he's given up this year), the right hander went the distance and picked up his second win of the year. He also helped his own cause with a pair of doubles and scored twice. His lead-off double in the third ignited WHS' big inning.

"It's difficult for a sophomore to be successful at this level," Isaacs said. "But my teammates have been terrific. All I have to do is throw strikes, and it's so great playing with these guys. They play great defense and they know what to do."

"Hunter didn't have his best stuff tonight, but he fought through it," Hardee said. "And that happens sometimes. You're pitches aren't working, so you have to rely on the guys behind you to make the plays. Hunter has done a great job for us. He and Matt Lambert have really been great additions to our team. They've really given us some punch at the bottom of the line up." Isaacs is batting .310 since joining the varsity; Lambert is hitting .322. Lambert chipped in with two runs-batted-in in Tuesday's blowout win. He has nine RBI on the year. The Pioneers, who have raised their team batting average 70 points (they're batting .300 as a team) in the last three weeks, had nine hits Tuesday night.

Eight of those hits came in the third inning and broke a 1-1 tie. And the Pioneers did most of that damage against losing pitcher Drew Bolick (2-3) of the Panthers. The right hander came into the game with a 1.78 ERA.

"We hit the ball as a team no matter what," Hunter Isaacs said. "We get after it and we want to win. But having Ryder (Jones) on the team is such a big plus. He does a great job encouraging us. He wants to win as badly as we do. He's a great teammate."

The win guarantees WHS will play a home game in the opening round of the NW3A/4A Conference Tournament next Tuesday night against the No.6 seed, whoever that may be at the moment. Tuesday's loss, coupled with Hickory beating St. Stephens 8-3, knocks the Panthers (11-8; 4-7) into a three-way tie for fifth place with St. Stephens and Fred T. Foard.

"We're just concentrating on playing good baseball right now," Hardee said. "We might be able to move up in the standings, but if we don't, the key is to just keep winning. And we're doing it with some young guys in the line up. You don't think of us as a young ball club, but we've got some sophomores and juniors that have really contributed during this run."

Jesse Illich was 2-3 with a double and two RBI; Ryder Jones drove in a run; Tyler Sturgell was

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2-3 with a double and three RBI; Mason Illich drove in a run. "A month ago, we couldn't hit anyone," Hardee said. "But now, if you throw us a fast ball, we're going to drill it. We're scoring runs, we're hitting it very well, and we take a lot of pride in how we play. We've really come along. The guys are putting the work in and it's really paying off." The Pioneers travel to North Davidson for a non-conference game tonight. Chance Richards (2-2), who threw a complete-game victory against A.C. Reynolds on Saturday, gets the starting nod. Coverage begins at 6:30 p.m. on Classic Hits 100.7 FM.

NOTES: Third baseman Carson Isaacs was hit on his right hand on a pick-off throw by Bolick in the second inning. He eventually scored moments later, but left the game in the third inning, and was replaced by Matt Lambert at third. According to WHS coach Pete Hardee, Isaacs will sit out tonight's game at North Davidson.

NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONFERENCE BASEBALL TUESDAY'S GAMES

WATAUGA 12, HIBRITEN 2
ALEXANDER CENTRAL 5, SOUTH CALDWELL 3
HICKORY 8, ST. STEPHENS 3
WEST LINCOLN 11, FRED T. FOARD 4

WEDNESDAY'S GAMES

WATAUGA @ NORTH DAVIDSON
NORTH LINCOLN @ ALEXANDER CENTRAL

NW3A/4A STANDINGS

ALEXANDER CENTRAL 8-3; 18-4

SOUTH CALDWELL 8-4; 11-9

WATAUGA 6-5; 12-10

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HICKORY 5-6; 12-9

ST. STEPHENS 4-7; 11-7

HIBRITEN 4-7; 11-8

FRED T. FOARD 4-7; 8-11