

This Is Getting Monotonous....

Written by Mike Kelly

Saturday, 27 April 2013 11:35

Watauga High baseball coach Pete Hardee has had his share of great baseball teams over the years. He's won conference championships, three tournament championships, he's made the state semifinals, and he's won two sectional titles. But this year's team, which began the season losing nine of 11 games, has

developed into quite a success story.

The Pioneers, riding a nine-game winning streak, closed out the regular season with a 12-0 win against St. Stephens on Senior Night at Pioneer Field Friday night. The game was called after 4 1/2 innings because of the ten-run mercy rule. It's WHS' third lopsided win in a row, and it's the fourth time in the last five games that the Pioneers have humbled an opponent.

And WHS (14-10 overall; 7-5 Northwestern 3A/4A Conference), which has scored 61 runs in its last five games, will march its way into the NW3A/4A Conference Tournament as a heavy favorite to win the title. But Hardee isn't looking ahead. Instead he's living by that old cliché, "take it one game at a time."

"I've been tempted to start talking about the importance of winning the conference tournament (which begins Tuesday night in Boone) to make the state playoffs," Hardee said. "But, as hard as it is, I've decided to just worry about the game at hand. These guys are having so much fun right now. They're so relaxed. Why mess that up. We're playing our best baseball of the season at the right time."

"I think getting our first (win) down at the (East Rutherford) Easter tournament gave us a lot of confidence," said senior Ryder Jones, who set the single-season RBI record. "I started hitting the ball like I'm suppose to, and everyone is hitting the ball, we really feel good about ourselves right now. It's nice to have the record, but it also means guys on getting on base when I come up to bat. It's great. I feel we can beat anyone in the state."

Jones broke the record with a three-run homer in the second inning that highlighted a four-run frame. That blow gave Jones 36 RBI, snapping the school record of 35 set by Jonathan Greene in 2004. It also gave WHS a commanding 6-0 lead, and the game was all but over.

Jones belted a two-run shot in the third. It was his tenth homer of the season leaving him one shy of the school record (11 set by Greene in 2004). Jones, who drove in five runs in Friday's win, now has ten home runs and 38 RBI on the year. He also helped his own cause by tossing four shutout innings for his fourth win of the year. The right hander, who wasn't overpowering, scattered two hits, walked one, hit a batter, and struck out three.

"It took me a while to get loose," Jones said. "But from the third inning on, I started feeling good. It's nice to win this game, and to go into the tournament with a lot of momentum."

Jesse Illich hit his first home run of the year, a three-run shot in the third; Mason Illich celebrated Senior Night with a two-run double that gave WHS a 2-0, first-inning lead. Ironically, the Pioneers only made seven hits in Friday's win. But they took advantage of three walks, a hit batter and two St. Stephens (12-8; 4-8) errors.

"Getting the chance to work outside, it's really set us off," said WHS senior Tyler Jones, who was 1-2 with an RBI and three runs scored in his final regular-season home game with the Pioneers. "Like Ryder said, we were living in a batting cage for the first month of the season. But since we got outside, we've caught fire, and we're hungry for more."

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And the Pioneers will see St. Stephens in a rematch Tuesday in the opening round of the NW3A/4A Conference Tournament. The Indians, who finished the regular season in a three-way tie for last place with Hibriten and Fred T. Foard, are the No.6 seed.

"We're having a lot of fun right now," Tyler Jones said. "And coach Hardee's attitude has carried over to us. Things are going really well. We want to win the conference championship more than anything. Coming through the first half of the season like we did, we have some doubters, and we probably still do, but we're out to prove every day that we're a good ball club. We may have started slow, but we want to finish strong, and show people who we are and what we can do."

And the Pioneers, who were 1-5 and in last place at the midway point of the conference season, made it a clean sweep with Friday's win against the Indians. And the Pioneers, who won four of those games by the ten-run mercy rule, outscored their opponents by the whopping margin of 65-6 in the second half.

"You always hope to go no worse than .500 in the first half of the conference season," Hardee said. "You just want to be in a position to make a run in the second half. But to do what we've done, especially with the way we played in the first half, is incredible. I'm so proud of these guys. They never gave up. They put in the work, and it's paid off."

"We need to play for the names on the front of our jerseys, not the ones on the back, Tyler Jones said. "We play for pride, the program, and ourselves in that order. And that's what we've done during this run. And for the seniors on this team, this was our night tonight. We want to play for as long as we can. It's going to be tough when the time comes to take this jersey off for the last time."

The Pioneers will play the Indians Tuesday night at Pioneer Field at 6:30 p.m. The conference semifinals and finals will be played at MSDeal Stadium in Granite Falls, N.C., Friday and Saturday. Coverage of Tuesday's game begins at 6 p.m. on Classic Hits 100.7 FM.

NOTES: The Pioneers honored eight seniors before Friday's game: Ryder Jones, Tyler Jones, Chance Richards, Mason Illich, Andrew Miller, Tyler Sturgill, Tripp Taylor, and Alex Parsons....The Indians are 0-5 lifetime against the Pioneers in Boone....The Pioneers are riding their longest winning streak since the 2000 season. That team was 10-0 in the old Northwestern 4A Conference and finished the year with a 20-5 record. The Pioneers lost to Richmond County in the regional semifinals that year....WHS won the NW3A/4A Conference Tournament in 2011; the Pioneers have three tournament titles in school history (1999 and 2000 in the old NW3A/4A).

NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONFERENCE

FRIDAY'S GAMES

WATAUGA 12, ST. STEPHENS 0

HICKORY 3, FRED T. FOARD 0

ALEXANDER CENTRAL 3, HIBRITEN 0

NW3A/4A STANDINGS

ALEXANDER CENTRAL 9-3; 19-4

SOUTH CALDWELL 8-4; 11-9

WATAUGA 7-5; 14-10

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HICKORY 6-6; 13-9
FRED T. FOARD 4-8; 10-12
ST. STEPHENS 4-8; 12-8
HIBRITEN 4-8; 11-9

NORTHWESTERN 3A-4A TOURNAMENT PAIRINGS

Tuesday's first round games

No. 5 Fred T. Foard (10-12) at No. 4 Hickory (13-9), 7 p.m.
No. 7 Hibriten (11-9) at No. 2 South Caldwell (11-9), 6:30 p.m.
No. 6 St. Stephens (12-8) at No. 3 Watauga (14-10), 6:30 p.m.
No. 1 Alexander Central - bye

Friday's semifinals

at MSDeal Stadium, Granite Falls, N.C.

Foard-Hickory winner vs. No. 1 Alexander Central (19-4), 7 p.m.
Hibriten-South Caldwell winner vs. St. Stephens-Watauga winner, 4:30 p.m.

Saturday's championship

at MSDeal Stadium, Granite Falls, N.C.

Friday's winners, 7 p.m.