

Spartans Derail Pioneers

Written by Mike Kelly
Saturday, 04 May 2013 10:08

Nothing lasts forever. Change is inevitable. Sometimes it's for the good, and sometimes, well, it's not very favorable. The Watauga High baseball team found the latter part of that statement to be true and extremely painful at the same time. The Pioneers (15-11), one of the hottest teams in western North Carolina, let alone

the state in recent weeks, saw their ten-game winning streak come to an a crashing halt on Friday in the semifinal round of the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference Tournament.

South Caldwell (13-9) defeated WHS 8-1 at MSDeal Stadium in Granite Falls, N.C. It's WHS' first loss since April 9 (a 10-9 setback at home against North Davidson), and Friday's setback may have squashed WHS' playoff hopes as well. The Spartans nailed down the No.2 seed and the automatic berth to the state playoffs.

The Pioneers, who haven't missed the state playoffs since 2006, had to win the conference tournament to nail down the No.2 seed and the conference's automatic berth in the state playoffs.

But South Caldwell, which will make its tenth straight appearance in the tournament championship game dating back to 2004, dashed those dreams. The Spartans will play the top seed, Alexander Central (20-4), in the finals Saturday night at 7 p.m. The Cougars, who are making their first appearance in the finals since 2005, advanced to the title game by knocking off Fred T. Foard, the No.5 seed, 3-2 in eight innings in Friday's second semifinal game.

"All we can do now is wait and hope that we get a shot at making the state playoffs," WHS coach Pete Hardee said. "But we made our own bed. We got off to a terrible start, and it may cost us in the end. It was a great run, but we just didn't play well today. We just gave up too many walks."

Four different WHS pitchers coughed up eight walks and hit a batter. The Pioneers also made four error, something they haven't done in more than a month. Ryder Jones (4-3), who limited South Caldwell to three hits, suffered the loss. The right hander, who struggled with his control, gave up four earned runs with seven walks in 3.1 innings.

In turn, winning pitcher Gage Parham, who is 2-1 lifetime against the Pioneers, went the distance and held WHS to just one run. Coming in, the Pioneers had erupted for 108 runs during a 14-game stretch (that's an average of 8.4 runs-per-game), dating back to April 3, when their streak began.

"(Gage Parham) is a good player," Hardee said. "He's not going to overpower you, and he won't strikeout a lot of guys. But he does throw strikes, and he gets the job done. He's a competitive guy. He did a good job against us the last time we played them (a 3-2 WHS win on April 19), but we were fortunate to win that game."

Parham, who will attend Gardner-Webb University in the fall, tossed his second complete game against the Pioneers on Friday. He held WHs to six hits, and the only blemish was a solo home run by Tyler Sturgill (his fifth of the year) in the sixth inning. That blow put WHS on the board, but by that time, the Spartans owned a 6-1 lead.

And the Spartans, who have won the conference tournament seven times in the last eight years, didn't waste any time grabbing the lead. They scored a run in the first inning as the first three hitters reached safely. Taylor Purus drove in the game's first run with a double to right

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field.

And the Spartans, who left five men on base, including three in scoring position, and also lost a base runner in the first three innings of the game, finally broke the contest open in the fourth. They scored five runs on three hits, and the Pioneers contributed four walks and made two errors in the process. That outburst gave South Caldwell a 6-0 lead and basically put the contest out of reach.

"It's tough to win a conference tournament," Hardee said. "You try to set up your pitching staff, so you can put yourself in a position to win it all. But I guess, I didn't do a very good job of that. Ryder really struggled today, and the walks killed us."

The lower part of South Caldwell's batting order benefitted the most from WHS' generosity. The last four batters in the line up (Trent Wakefield, Nick Sheilds, Anthony Rossi and Isaac Tilghman) walked five times, and scored twice. The loss leaves WHS in a state of limbo until the state playoffs pairings are announced by the North Carolina High School Athletic Association by the middle of next week (Tuesday-Thursday).

"It's been a great run," Hardee said. "I am very proud of what these guys did, especially not giving up on themselves, or the team when we were 2-9. But we lost to a quality team today. We controlled our own destiny, but we let it get away. It's out of our hands. All we can do is to hope for the best. This team deserves to be in the state playoffs, but it's not up to me."

If the Pioneers do make the state playoffs as a wildcard team, they will play a first-round game on the road next Friday, May 10.

NOTES: Matt Lambert has an 11-game hitting streak. The WHS sophomore kept his streak alive with a single in the fifth inning....WHS suffered its third loss in the conference semifinals in the last four years....Friday's run total was WHS' lowest offensive output since a 2-1 loss to the East Rutherford JV team on April 1....WHS' ten-game winning streak was its longest since the 2000 season....WHS' playoffs status will be judged on its winning percentage. WHS' has a .577 winning percentage following Friday night's loss.

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BASEBALL

FRIDAY'S GAMES

MSDEAL STADIUM, GRANITE FALLS, N.C.

SEMIFINALS ROUND

SOUTH CALDWELL 8, WATAUGA 1

ALEXANDER CENTRAL 3, FRED T. FOARD 2 (8 INNINGS)

CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

SOUTH CALDWELL v. ALEXANDER CENTRAL, 7 P.M.

SOFTBALL

FRIDAY'S GAME

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AT TAYLORSVILLE

CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

ALEXANDER CENTRAL 4, FRED T. FOARD 3 (9 INNINGS)