

Tar Heels Tame Tigers, 4-2

Written by Dave Schmidt

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Home runs are few and far between at the College World Series these days, which made Brian Holberton's first-inning shot all the more important for North Carolina. Holberton staked freshman starter Trent Thornton to a two-run lead before he even took the mound Tuesday, and No. 1 national seed Carolina went on to beat LSU 4-2 in an elimination game.

"We certainly are happy to have survived this one," Tar Heels coach Mike Fox said. "I thought the home run by Brian was really crucial for us, just kind of let the air out a little bit and let us play with a lead, something we seemed to haven't done in a while."

The Tar Heels (58-11) play North Carolina State or UCLA in another elimination game Thursday. The No. 4-seeded Tigers (57-11) went 0-2 in their first CWS appearance since winning the 2009 national title.

"We expected to come out here and play better than we did," LSU coach Paul Mainieri said. "Even though we didn't play great, we lost a one-run game and a two-run game. We were in position to win the games. It wasn't like we came out here and got blown out. We were right there and just couldn't come through with the play here or hit here or a pitch there, and it stings a lot."

Carolina, which lost 8-1 to North Carolina State in its CWS opener, staved off elimination for the third time in the NCAA tournament and remains the only team in the country to not lose back-to-back games this season. The Tar Heels are outscoring opponents 85-30 after losses, and their 58 wins are a school record.

Thornton (12-1) pitched a strong seven innings in his first start since March 27. The 6-foot, 170-pound right-hander worked around two singles and three walks to hold the Tigers scoreless until the fifth and escaped trouble in the seventh thanks to a double play.

"It's always good to get a lead early in the game," Thornton said. "When you get a lead early, you need to focus and know that if you just don't give up any runs, you'll win the game."

Leading 4-2, Thornton walked Christian Ibarra to start the eighth and was relieved by Chris McCue, who hit Sean McMullen with a 2-2 pitch to load the bases with two out.

That brought up Mark Laird, who had a double and four singles in his first eight CWS at-bats. But McCue got Laird to fly out to short left field and keep it a two-run game. McCue worked a perfect ninth for his second save after getting pulled with one out in the ninth of the super regional-clinching win over South Carolina.

"I was kind of frustrated that I didn't get the job done that time," McCue said. "Obviously, it was good that we won. But this time I was just really making sure that I made good pitches and that I was going to get outs. I refused to not finish the game."

LSU scored only three runs in two CWS games. National freshman of the year Alex Bregman, who was batting a team-leading .374, was hitless in eight at-bats. Raph Rhymes, batting .337, was 0 for 9 in Omaha and stranded eight base runners against the Tar Heels. Christian Ibarra, batting .311, finished the season hitless in his last 22 at-bats.

Thornton, who has served in every capacity on the Carolina pitching staff, got the call over available weekend starters Hobbs Johnson and Benton Moss, both of whom have struggled of late. Thornton came in as the Tar Heels' best pitcher in the postseason, having allowed two runs in 21 1-3 innings.

He threw a career-high 114 pitches in his seven-plus innings, allowing two runs on nine hits and four walks. LSU starter Cody Glenn (7-3), making his first appearance since starting the opening game of the SEC tournament May 22, last just two innings. He allowed three runs on

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five hits -- the biggest one being Holberton's homer -- before turning things over to Brent Bonvillain.

Mainieri said the Tar Heels' homer was especially devastating because he thought Glenn had struck out Holberton on the previous pitch, but umpire Steve Mattingly called it a ball. Holberton then sent Glenn's 3-2 offering over the wall in right center for only the second homer in seven CWS games.

"It goes to show the whole team doesn't want to give up," Holberton said. "We've done it all year with our backs against the wall. We just come out fighting. I think we play better that way. We just want to keep going."

NOTES: Carolina established a new school record for single-season wins with its 58th victory. The previous school mark was set by the 2007 team that finished 57-16....UNC won its nation-leading 48th postseason game since 2006. Only South Carolina (46) has won more than 40 games in that eight-year stretch.....The Tar Heels improved to 16-20 all-time in the CWS and 14-12 since 2006.....Tuesday's win was Carolina's third in a row over LSU with all three coming in Omaha. The Tar Heels defeated the Tigers twice in 2008.....UNC improved to 11-0 on the season following a loss. Carolina is the only team in the country to not have a losing streak in 2013.....Tuesday's win was also the third straight time the Tar Heels have won a CWS elimination game after losing their opener. UNC defeated Texas in 2011 and Southern Miss in 2009.....RHP Trent Thornton improved to 12-1 on the season in his sixth start of the year. His 12 wins in 2013 are the most for a Carolina freshman in school history and tie Adam Warren (2007), Jim Dougherty (1990) and John Thoden (1989) for fifth-most all-time.....Thornton is now 3-0 with two saves and an ERA of 1.64 in six NCAA tournament appearances. He has allowed just four earned runs in 22.0 innings of work with 21 strikeouts.....Thornton's win Tuesday was the first in the CWS for a Tar Heel freshman since Kent Emanuel pitched a complete-game shutout against Texas in 2011.....RHP Chris McCue recorded his second save of the season with two scoreless innings, his eighth scoreless appearance in his last nine outings. His other save came against Boston College on March 23.....McCue is 1-0 with one save and a 1.72 ERA in seven NCAA tournament appearances.....C Brian Holberton finished 2 for 4 with two RBIs and hit his 12th home run of the season in the first inning, a two-run shot. According to ESPN research, the homer was the first to right-center in CWS play in the three-year history of TD Ameritrade Park.....Holberton has had at least two hits in a game 23 times in 2013.....3B Colin Moran finished 3 for 5 with an RBI and two runs scored to lift his 2013 postseason batting average 51 percentage points from .212 to .263. His run-scoring single extended his school record for single-season RBIs to 89.....DH Landon Lassiter finished 2 for 5 with a run scored to extend his season-long hitting streak to 10 games.....Lassiter has reached base safely in 61 of his 67 appearances this season, and he has recorded multiple hits in six of nine postseason games. For the season, Lassiter has 28 multi-hit games.....Lassiter and Moran moved into a tie for seventh in school history in single-season runs scored. Both players now have scored 75 runs in 2013, matching Dustin Ackley (2009) and Russ Adams (2002).....RF Skye Bolt went 2 for 4 with an RBI single. The two-hit performance was his third multi-hit outing of the postseason and his 22nd of the season.

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Photo Courtesy: Trent Troutman, UNC Athletics