

And there it goes.....

Written by Mike Kelly

Saturday, 21 December 2013 13:47

Yeah, that phrase best describes two of the greatest players ever to wear the blue and white of Watauga High. Jonathan Green and Ryder Jones, the "Sultans of Swat", were honored last Wednesday night at Lentz-Eggers Gym during halftime ceremonies of the WHS-Wilkes Central boy's basketball game.

Both player were immortalized as they had their respective jerseys numbers retired by the WHS athletic department.

Greene, a catcher who wore the No.26 at WHS, was an All-America at Western Carolina University. He belted a school record 11 home runs his senior year and he drove in (at the time) a school record 35 runs, and batted .561 that season. Greene backboned WHS to its first state playoff appearance in three years his senior year.

That effort also landed him on the Class 4A North Carolina Baseball Coaches Association's All-State Team.

"Jonathan and Ryder were two of the most dangerous hitters we've ever had," said WHS coach Pete Hardee. "The home runs, all the runs they drove in, the big hits in the clutch. They were both very similiar. It took Ryder a while to get use to the cold weather, but once he got going, you saw his production level go way up. They're just solid hitters. It's scary just how similiar they are."

Greene, who voluntarily retired from baseball after the 2012 season, played professionally for five years in the Texas Rangers organization. The Rangers selected him in the eighth round (280th pick) of the Major League Baseball Amateur Draft in 2007 (WHS' highest selection in the draft at the time).

He belted 11 home runs in his rookie year with the Spokane (Wa.) Indians of the Class A (short-season) Northwest League. He had 83 home runs in his professional career. He worked his way to the Class AA level with the Frisco Roughriders in Texas League before finally walking away. And Greene, who batted .292 with 18 home runs and 75 RBI in his final season, admits the time was right to walk away.

"It's just time to move on with my life," Greene said. "I'm married, I have a child now and I work with my dad. It's definitely an honor to have this happen. Coach (Pete) Hardee really pushed me. Coach called me on Monday and I was really surprised. It's baseball, it's fun. All the friends you make, the games, the travel, it makes for a lot of memories."

"Jonathan was a great hitter for us," Hardee said. "He could spray the ball all over the field. That's why he had so many doubles (19 his senior year) in his career. I remember when Western Carolina came to watch him play before a playoff game, and he kept going to right-center field during batting practice. Then he sends the ball the other way and belts five in a row over the left field fence. He was a tremendous leader, and a great leader for us."

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For Jones, a shortstop with the Pioneers, wore the No.9 during his short stay with the Pioneers last spring. His journey got underway last summer when he was selected by the San Francisco Giants in the second-round (64th pick overall) of the MLB Draft (the first WHS player to go that high in the draft).

And in his only season with the Pioneers, Jones, who got off to a slow start, finally revved it up and turned into an offensive dynamo. Jones tied the school record with 11 home runs and he set a new record by driving in a school record 43 RBI with a .461 batting average.

That outburst also ignited a ten-game winning streak, WHS' best stretch since 2000. Jones was named all-state by NCPreps.com and the NCBCA; he was the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference Player of the Year, and he was also named the North Carolina Gatorade Baseball Player of the Year.

"This is very special to me," said Jones, who is currently a third baseman in the Giants organization. "It's something I'll remember for the rest of my life. It took me a while to get started. The cold weather, new teammates, new town, the high expectations, I was more anxious than nervous. But I eventually settled down, and got comfortable. From that point on, we had a lot of fun and it got a lot easier."

"Ryder was without a doubt our leader last year," Hardee said. "And we're going to see the benefits of that this year. He really influenced our guys in a positive way. Now, we have a lot of players loaded with confidence because they watched how (Ryder) played and went about his business."

Jones, who signed his National Letter of Intent with Division I Stanford University of the Pacific 12 Conference in November of 2012, elected to play professionally instead, after he was selected high in the draft by the Giants. And he continued his torrid pace in his professional debut with the Giants' rookie league Class A affiliate in the Arizona League. He batted .317 with a home run, 18 RBI, nine doubles, a .400 slugging percentage, and a .794 on-base percentage.

Jones will be promoted this season. He will play for the Augusta GreenJackets, the lower Class A affiliate of the Giants, in the South Atlantic League.

"It's a lot easier," Jones said. "With school out of the way, I can focus all of my interests on baseball. Socially, not everybody is a stranger after a while. It was just getting use to a new surrounding. I just tried to stay quiet, and go about my business. It's like what happened (at Watauga). It took about five or six games to get comfortable here. It finally came together for me at the Easter tournament (at East Rutherford last April).

"we had a four hour practice and it was about 20 degrees (after WHS lost to the East Rutherford junior varsity team). But it all came together for us on that day. We started playing like a team, and I stopped worrying about impressing people and just played my game."

And the Pioneers were a different team from that point on. Following their 5-10 start, the Pioneers exploded offensively. They were averaging nearly ten runs a game during their

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ten-game winning streak. And the Pioneers, who finally saw their magical run come to an end in the semifinal round of the NW3A/4A Conference Tournament, finished with a 15-11 record---avoiding their first losing season since 2007, despite missing the state playoffs for the first time since 2006.

But despite that pratfall, Jones, like Greene, made a huge impact with the WHS baseball program.

"They're two good players, that's for sure," Hardee said. "You're very proud when you have players like this. It was exciting to see Jonathan go in the eighth round of the draft. Then Ryder goes in the second round (in June). Jonathan made it to (Class) AA, and he hit with a lot of power. He belted (83) home runs. Now it's Ryder's turn. He's just getting started. And it will be interesting to see just how far he goes. This is great for our program, and it was a huge honor coaching those guys."

Thanks for the memories guys.

Photo Courtesy: Ryder Jones, Pete Hardee, Jonathan Greene (L-R), Bill Sheffiield