

Pioneers Nip Cougars, 6-5

Written by Mike Kelly
Sunday, 02 March 2014 12:52

If the first two games of the season are any indication, the Watauga High baseball team will be walking a tightrope this season. For the second time in three days, the Pioneers squeaked out a close win against an arch-rival in a venue that's been less than hospitable in recent years.

On Thursday, the Pioneers hung on for an 8-6 win at A.C. Reynolds; on Saturday, they held on for a 6-5 win against Alexander Central at Gryder Stadium in a game you heard on AM 1450, WATA and GoBlueridge.net.

Utah Jones, who joined the baseball team one day after the WHS basketball team lost to Greensboro-Page in the sectional finals, settled the issue as he came on in the seventh and picked up his first career save. Jones, a right hander, coughed up a lead-off single to Tad Radcliffe in the bottom of the seventh. Courtesy runner Rod Chapman, representing the potential tying run, moved into second base on Mason Stikeleader's ground-ball out.

But Jones retired Dillon Dessecker on a fly ball to center field, and he struck out Tyler Isenhour to end the game.

"And for a guy that just joined our team, that was a gutsy effort," said WHS coach Pete Hardee. "We've had our problems here. How many times have we had a lead late in the game, and it got away from us. But this team doesn't get rattled. They don't panick."

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And like they did on Thursday, the Pioneers (2-0), wiped out an early deficit and rallied to take a 6-2 lead. Five errors by the Cougars (1-2), who lost their second game in a row, helped WHS build its early lead.

A lead-off single by Matt Lambert, a hit batsman, and a single by Colby Illich loaded the bases with one out. An error by Ratcliffe---he made three on the day---allowed the tying run to score. A two-run single by Carson Isaacs (who's batting .571) gave the Pioneers a 3-2 lead. A bases-loaded walk to Hunter Isaacs made it 4-2.

"I'm not very happy with our performance," said Alexander Central coach Jerry Whitman. "We just had a tough day in the field. We made too many mistakes on routine ground balls, and that killed us."

Back-to-back errors by Ratcliffe, following a lead-off double by Steadman Sauls in the third, gave WHS a 5-2 lead. A bunt single by Jones to lead off the fourth, and a throwing error by losing pitcher Stikeleather, put Jones on third with nobody out. He scored on Hunter Isaacs' sacrifice fly for a 6-2 lead.

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"We took advantage of their mistakes," Hardee said. "It allowed us to take an early lead and we found a way to hang on. It wasn't pretty, but its a win. And we're off to a good start. That's very important with a young team like we have, especially on the mound."

Winning pitcher Jesse Illich, who coughed up a two-run homer to Riley Smith, who will attend UNC-Asheville next fall to play baseball, gave the Cougars a 2-0 lead in the bottom of the first. But Illich buckled down from there and carried WHS into the fourth inning. The right hander gave up three runs, two earned, on three hits with a walk and three strikeouts. He also hit two batters.

"Jesse wasn't comfortable out there," Hardee said. "You could see it when the game started. But he hung in there and carried us into the fourth. He's that kind of player. There's no quit in the guy. It's still a little early to gauge a personality on this team, but one thing I know for sure, they don't give up easy."

Ian Watts, who was superb against the Rockets on Thursday, hit a snag against the Cougars on Saturday. A lead-off walk and an RBI double by Smith made it 6-4. It also opened the door for Lambert, who came on in relief and kept the Cougars at bay, despite some shaky moments.

He stranded the tying run at second base in the fifth, when he struck out Isenhour to end the

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frame; and with runners at first and second and two outs, he retired Deal on a routine ground ball to end the sixth.

Lambert tossed two scoreless innings, he gave up a double, four walks, one intentional, with a pair of strikeouts.

"And that's Lambert," Hardee said. "He's got an attitude. And you've got to have that to be successful in those situations. It was a very good outing for his first time out. We're counting on Jones and Lambert to be among our leaders. They're only juniors, but they've been through the wars. They know what it takes to win games like this."

Carson Isaacs was 1-3 with a walk, a stolen base and two RBI; Hunter Isaacs was 0-2 with a walk, a sacrifice fly and two RBI; Lambert was 1-4 with a stolen base, a single, and a run scored; Sauls was 1-4 with a double and a run scored; Adam Greene was 2-4; Colby Illich was 1-2 with a run scored.

Smith led the Cougars, going 2-3 with a two-run homer, a run-scoring double and three RBI; Stikeleather was 1-3 with a sac fly and an RBI. Stikeleather, who deserved a better fate, suffered the loss. He went five innings and coughed up six runs with eight strikeouts, but he was victimized by a shaky defense.

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The Pioneers outhit the Cougars, 7-5. The Pioneers travel to North Davidson Wednesday night. Coverage begins at 6:30 p.m. on Classic Hits 100.7 FM and GoBlueridge.net.