

Along Came Jones....

Written by Mike Kelly
Thursday, 20 March 2014 08:38

Remember that old song by The Coasters. No matter how tough it gets, "slow walkin, slow talkin Jones" always comes along to save the day. Well junior Utah Jones has done just that for the Watauga High baseball this season.

Since he joined the team on March 1, Jones has made five appearances, all in relief, and he's racked up a win and a pair of saves. And the right hander has been his best at the worst of times.

That was certainly the case Wednesday night as the Pioneers (4-3 overall; 2-1 NW3A/4A) held on to beat Freedom 4-3 at Patriots Field in a Northwestern 3A/4A Conference game in Morganton, N.C. The win snapped a two-game slide and it keeps WHS just one game off the lead in the NW3A/4A Conference.

Fred T. Foard (4-3; 3-0) maintained its grip on first place by knocking off Hibriten 2-1 Wednesday night.

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Jones came on and quelled a Patriots (4-3; 0-3) rally in the sixth. Leading 4-1, he coughed up a run-scoring single to Morgan Yancey, and a throwing error by second baseman Colby Illich allowed another run to score, narrowing the margin at 4-3.

But Jones got Landon Kincaid on a ground ball to second to end the inning, and he left the tying run on second base in the seventh as he struck out Dalton McGalliard to end the game.

"He has been so important for us this season," WHS coach Pete Hardee said. "The guy just gets people out. I was hoping to finish the sixth with (starting pitcher Matt) Lambert because I thought Utah was a little tired. He looked a little tired Saturday (at Providence). But Matt got into trouble and Utah came on and settled things down."

"I was looking for a strikeout in that situation," Jones said about Yancey. "You don't want them hitting the ball because they'll score a run. But I left one out there, and he ripped a single and drove in a run anyway. But my defense made the plays behind me and we won the game. It's a huge win for us. Every game you win is big, especially on the road."

Jones has been stingy to say the least. In eight innings of work, he's given up two earned runs on seven hits with two walks and eight strikeouts with a 1.75 earned-run-average.

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And Jones jump-started WHS with a two-run homer---his first career home run at the high school level---in the first inning. The Pioneers doubled their lead thanks to a two-run double by Lambert in the fourth.

But despite the 4-0 lead, the Pioneers continue to struggle at the plate. They only made four hits on the night.

Losing pitcher Jason Ray had something to do with that. The right hander, who made two crucial mistakes, retired nine straight during one stretch. He also had six strikeouts.

"We're not swinging the bats at all right now," Hardee said. "But we made the most of what we had tonight. It might be like this all season. But give (Ray) credit. He moved the ball around, and we had our problems with him.

"I was real concerned in the sixth. A (Freedom) like this gets a base runner or two, and then they get a hit, and you make a mistake in the field, and all heck breaks loose. Their (Freedom) play hard. They don't quit. It's one of those games where you get on the bus before they figure out they scored more than you did. It was scary."

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But Lambert (1-0), who made his second start of the season, was cruising along until he got in trouble in the sixth. The right hander, despite walking six men, kept the Patriots in check.

He gave up three runs, two earned, on just two hits before he departed. The Patriots only made three hits. The Pioneers also turned a pair of double plays.

"I thought Matt threw the ball real well tonight," Hardee said. "I thought he had good control, especially with his curve ball. And we made some big plays defensively. That's what I really like about this group, they make plays in the field. It was a good win, especially after we lost two in a row. It keeps us in the conference race."

The Pioneers return home to play Hibriten Friday night; they play a make up game at home on Saturday against A.C. Reynolds. Coverage begins at 6 p.m., Friday night; Coverage begins at 1:30 p.m., Saturday. Both games will air on AM 1450, WATA and GoBlueridge.net.

NOTES: The WHS junior varsity team defeated Freedom, 2-0, for their first NW3A/4A win....The JV team plays at 12 noon Saturday against ACR. The varsity starts at 2 p.m.

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WEDNESDAY NIGHT'S GAMES

NORTHWESTERN 3A/4A CONFERENCE

WATAUGA 4, FREEDOM 3

FRED T. FOARD 2, HIBRITEN 1

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THURSDAY'S GAMES

SOUTH CALDWELL @ HICKORY

PATTON @ ST. STEPHENS