

## Rockets Soar Past WHS, 7-1

Written by Mike Kelly

Saturday, 22 March 2014 16:44

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The woes continued on Saturday for the Watauga High baseball team. The Pioneers (4-5), who have lost four of their last five games, lost to A.C. Reynolds 7-1 in a non-conference game at Pioneers Field.

The Rockets (4-3-1), who have won three in a row (they've only given up one run during that stretch), also won their first game in Boone since 2007. Their top two hitters, Cory Watt and Jon Merrill, who was also the winning pitcher on Saturday, did most of the damage.

Those two produced six hits, including three doubles, two walks, two stolen bases, and five runs-batted-in. Individually, Merrill was 3-5 with a pair of doubles and four RBI; Watt was 3-3 with a double, two stolen bases, he scored three times, he drove in a run, and he walked twice.

"Jon made me look like a genius," said ACR coach Brian Craig. "He was batting seventh, but I decided to move him up in the order. Those guys really gave us a great one-two punch up there."

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The Rockets jumped on top for good with three runs in the third. An error, a sacrifice bunt, a single by Watt, and a two-run single by Merrill gave ACR a 2-1 lead.

The Rockets took control of the game with two more runs in the fourth. Watt and Merrill highlighted that rally with consecutive run-scoring doubles. And Merrill made it stand up as he tossed a complete game.

The right hander scattered six hits and struck out six. The only run he gave up came in the first inning.

Jesse Illich led off the game with an infield single. He stole second base, moved to third on a ground ball by Carson Isaacs, and he scored on a wild pitch. That gave WHS a 1-0 lead, and losing pitcher Jeffrey Gainey (0-1), who was making his first start of the season, made it stand up until the third.

Gainey was finally knocked out of the game with two outs in the fourth. He coughed up five earned runs on six hits in 3.2 innings. He also hit three batters. And the WHS pitching staff handed out five walks hit four batters on Saturday. The Pioneers have given up 18 walks in their last three games.

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"We're not pitching it well right now, and we're not swinging the bats," WHS coach Pete Hardee said. "That's about it. But we're not pressing. We just played two bad games. I haven't lost faith in this team. I like this group. It's a good group. It's still early in the season."

"We're just in a funk," said WHS junior Hunter Isaacs. "We're not playing Watauga baseball. Watauga has always been known for its hitting. But we're not swinging the bats right now. And for me personally, it's the same thing that happened last year. I'm off to a slow start. But it's not bothering us as a team. We're just anxious to get back on the field and get back to work."

The Pioneers made six hits on Saturday and they left five men on base, four in scoring position. They had a huge scoring chance in the fifth, but they came away empty handed.

Trailing 5-1, Matt Tyndall and Colby Illich, the No.8 and No.9 hitters in the line up, got things started with back-to-back singles. They advanced to second and third on Jesse Illich's hot smash to third that Dalton Owenby made a great play on.

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But they were left stranded as Utah Jones popped up to short and Carson Isaacs flied out to center field.

"We're not having that big inning right now," Hardee said. "We're leaving a lot of people on base. We had a chance to get back in the game in the fifth inning. We had two men on and the top of the order coming up, but we didn't score. We just to work out of it. "

The Pioneers are 0-2 on this current four-game homestand. Weather-permitting, they host Patton on Tuesday night. The Pioneers and the Panthers are involved in a four-way tie for third place in the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference.

Coverage begins at 6 p.m. on AM 1450, WATA and GoBlueridge.net.

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