

Errors Doom WHS Again.....

Written by Mike Kelly
Friday, 02 May 2014 09:37

That's been the story all season. The Watauga High baseball team just keeps finding ways to make mistakes at the most critical times. And that was the case Thursday night as the Pioneers wasted a marvelous pitching performance by senior Jesse Illich (2-2).

The right hander went four-plus innings and gave up three runs, only one earned, on four hits with four strikeouts. But the Pioneers made two costly errors in the bottom of the fourth inning in a 7-2 loss against Hickory at Washam Field in Hickory, N.C. WHS has made 51 errors in 22 games this season.

An error by shortstop Carson Isaacs, and a miscue by third baseman Matt Lambert handed the Red Tornadoes a pair of unearned runs and a 2-1 lead. The Pioneers tied it up in top of the fifth, thanks to a wild pitch that scored pinch-hitter Andy Critcher, who reached on a lead-off single.

But the Red Tornadoes, who have won six of their last seven games, jumped on top for good in the bottom of the fifth. A run-scoring single by Coan McAlpine drove in Joe Sadowski, giving the Red Tornadoes a 3-2 lead. McAlpine was difference maker Thursday night. He was 4-4 with a double, a run scored and he drove in two runs.

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"We were real prepared for tonight's game," McAlpine said. "Any time you play Watauga, you know you're in for a tough game. They're well coached and they don't beat themselves. But we had a lot riding on this game. We still have a shot to catch Hibriten for fourth place and a home game in the first round of the conference tournament."

Thursday night's win pulled the Red Tornadoes (11-9 overall; 7-6 Northwestern 3A-4A Conference) into a fourth-place tie with Hibriten. Patton defeated Hibriten 5-1 Thursday night. The Red Tornadoes play Hibriten in their regular-season finale Friday night.

The loss snapped WHS' (10-12; 4-9) three-game winning streak, and it guarantees that WHS will play a road game in the opening round of the conference tournament. The Pioneers, the No.6 seed, will travel to Morganton-Patton, the No.3 seed, next Tuesday night.

It's also the first time since 2002 that WHS has played a road game in the first-round of the conference tournament.

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Leading 3-2, the Red Tornadoes broke the game open by scoring four runs on four consecutive singles in the bottom of the sixth. And they scored all those runs with two outs. Hunter Isaacs, who replaced Illich in the bottom of the fifth, was roughed up for four earned runs on five hits.

"We made good contact at the plate tonight," said HHS coach David Craft. "And you've got to have that big hit, that clutch hit against Watauga."

"Playing at Washam is huge for us," McAlpine. "We play with a lot of confidence on our home field. It would be nice, if we can nail down a home game in the first round of the (conference) tournament."

The Pioneers were held to four hits. Lambert had the biggest blow as he belted his first home run of the year in the top of the fourth that gave WHS a short-lived 1-0 lead. Lambert, who made the all-tournament team in the Tarboro Easter Classic last weekend, is hitting at a .500 clip (6-12) with five RBI in his last four games.

"Matt is a guy we're really counting on in the clean-up spot," said WHS coach Pete Hardee. "He was struggling early, so I decided to move him into the nine hole to build up his confidence. He's more selective at the plate, and he's starting to hit with power. We need his bat to be productive in our line up."

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McAlpine got the start, but he left after he coughed up Lambert's home run in the fourth. He gave up one run on one hit, but he walked three men. Kaidyn Hamilton came on in relief and picked up the win. The left hander, despite a shaking fifth inning, scattered three hits, gave up an earned run, struck out four and walked two to get the win.

"And he's been doing that for us all year," Craft said. "That's why I let him take us the rest of the way. He beat Fred T. Foard a couple of weeks ago (April 17). He knows what to do in a must-win game. And by winning this game, it gives us a shot at the number four seed and a home game in the conference tournament."

"We got a good pitching performance from Jesse," Hardee said. "We were keeping track of his pitch count. That's why I pulled him in the fifth inning. But we just can't avoid making critical mistakes. We kept ourselves in contention, and they just broke it open on us in the sixth."

The Pioneers return home to play South Caldwell in their regular-season finale tonight. It will also be Senior Night. Lambert (3-1, 3.48 ERA) will get the start for WHS. Coverage begins at 6 p.m. on Classic Hits 100.7 FM and GoBlueridge.net.

NOTES: Utah Jones did not play Thursday night. The WHS junior was benched for missing practice on Monday....The Pioneers are 5-0 at home against the Red Tornadoes. In turn, they're

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2-5 against the Red Tornadoes at Washam Field and at neutral sights.

THURSDAY'S GAMES

Northwestern 3A-4A

Freedom 6, St. Stephens 4

Hickory 7, Watauga 2

South Caldwell 3, Fred T. Foard 0

Patton 5, Hibriten 1

FRIDAY'S GAMES

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Northwestern 3A-4A

Hickory at Hibriten, 7 p.m.

St. Stephens at Fred T. Foard, 7 p.m.

South Caldwell at Watauga, 6:30 p.m.

Patton vs. Freedom at Frans Stadium, 7 p.m.