

## Isaacs Powers Pioneers Past Panthers

Written by Mike Kelly  
Wednesday, 07 May 2014 09:22

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Good things happen to those who wait. Well, that was certainly the case Tuesday night for Watauga High junior Hunter Isaacs.

Isaacs, who's had a trying season, came through with his best performance of the year in the opening-round of the Northwestern 3A-4A Conference Tournament. The right hander, who came on in relief in the second inning for an ineffective Utah Jones, smothered Patton High as the Pioneers rallied from an early 3-0 deficit to beat the Panthers 4-3 in nine innings at Panthers Stadium in Morganton, N.C.

The Pioneers will play Fred T. Foard in the semifinals at MS Deal Stadium in Granite Falls, N.C., Thursday afternoon. The Tigers (17-6), the No.2 seed, advanced by knocking off St. Stephens 9-1 Tuesday night.

Isaacs (4-2) tossed eight scoreless innings, he scattered seven hits and he struck out eight men to pick up the win. And Isaacs helped his own cause with a solo home run in the top of the ninth that gave WHS (11-13) its first lead of the night.

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"It was just his night," said WHS coach Pete Hardee. "How many times does a guy come in to pitch a game, do a great job on the mound, and then he wins the game with a home run. On top of that, his girl friend came to watch him play. It was just his night, that's for sure."

But Justin Greer had the biggest blow of the night. Greer, who has been one of WHS's hottest hitters of late (6-12, .500 batting average, HR, 8 walks, 6 runs scored, three RBI, and two stolen bases in his last seven games), belted his first home run of the year---a two-run shot---in the top of the sixth that tied the game, 3-3.

"Our team showed a lot of character in winning this game," Hardee said. "We got off to a bad start, but the guys responded. Hunter was solid on the mound. He stranded a lot of runners, and that gave us a chance to come back. I told the guys, they were leaving a lot of guys on base, and we had a serious chance to win this game."

"Give Watuaga a lot of credit," said Patton coach Jon Browning. "They made the plays, and they're pitcher just shut us down. We left a lot of guys on base. We had a chance early to break this game open, but we didn't get it done. We left the bases loaded one time, we left guys at second and third another time. That really hurt us as the game went on. They had all the momentum at the end of the game."

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Isaacs displayed his moxie in the second inning. He escaped a bases loaded, one out jam by striking out the No.3 hitter, Luke Baker, and getting the clean-up man, Hayden Caraway, on a pop fly to end the inning. He also left runners stranded at second and third in the fifth. But from the seventh inning on, Isaacs was in total control. He retired the last nine men (with four strikeouts ) he faced.

"I give all the credit to my defense," Isaacs said, in a modest tone. "They just made the plays behind me. All I was trying to do was to keep us close. But give all the credit to (catcher) Stedman (Sauls), he called a great game, and the our defense made some big plays. It's a great win, and it felt great to hit that home run. And I hit it against a good pitcher (Brock Toner). He got one up and I jumped on it."

It wasl sweet revenge for the Pioneers. Toner, who suffered the loss in relief, had a win and a save in two appearances against WHS this season.

"(Toner) their ace," Hardee said. "He throws hard, but he looked a little tired tonight, and I felt that gave us a shot to win the game. Hunter had a great game for us. He was really throwing hard tonight. His strength is hitting his spots, and he did that real well. You could see it. He just kept getting stronger as the game moved along. It's a big win. Hopefully, we can put a run together."

Jesse Illich had another stellar game in center field. The WHS senior threw out a couple of base

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runner. His biggest assist came in the bottom of the sixth, when he nailed Wyatt Fleming at the plate. Fleming, who led off the inning with a ground-rule double to right field, tried to score on William Kirk's single to center field. But Illich cut him down preserving the 3-3 tie.

"Baseball is a game of breaks," Browning said. "If Fleming's hit stays in the park, it's a triple, and he scores easily on Kirk's single. I gambled and sent him on that play. (Illich) made a great throw. Like I said, Watauga made a lot of plays. And that's the difference between winning a one-run game and losing a one-run game."

The Panthers stranded eight runners, seven in scoring position, and they lost four base runners. The Pioneers lost three.

"Patton is the best hitting team in the conference," Hardee said. "And to hold them down like we did tonight is huge. It's nice to win and make our way back to Deal Stadium. It seems like we belong there every year."

The Pioneers will play Foard 4:30 p.m. Thursday afternoon. Coverage begins at 4 p.m. on AM 1450, WATA and GoBlueridge.net.

**NOTES:** Jones got the start Tuesday night and left the game in the second inning. Jones was roughed up three runs, all earned, on two hits in just over an inning of work. He also hit three men. Baker's run-scoring single and a two-run double by starting pitcher Noah Eggers gave the Panthers a 3-0 first-inning lead.....The Pioneers are 1-1 in extra inning games....The Pioneers haven't lost a first-round game in the conference tournament since 1997....WHS has won three tournament championships, the most recent in 2011....WHS has been to the conference finals nine times. The Pioneers are 3-6 lifetime in championship games.

### **NORTHWESTERN 3A-4A CONFERENCE TOURNAMENT**

#### **TUESDAY'S GAMES**

**WATAUGA 4, PATTON 3**

**SOUTH CALDWELL 10, FREEDOM 0 (6 INNINGS)**

**FRED T. FOARD 9, ST. STEPHENS 1**

**HICKORY 6, HIBRITEN 3**

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### **THURSDAY'S GAMES**

**MS DEAL STADIUM, GRANITE FALLS, N.C.**

**No.6 WATAUGA v. No.2 FRED T. FOARD, 4:30 P.M.**

No.5 HICKORY v. No.1 SOUTH CALDWELL, 7 P.M.

### **FRIDAY'S GAMES**

CHAMPIONSHIP GAME, 7 P.M.

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