

Linville's blast lifts WHS

Written by Mike Kelly
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Max Linville's walk-off home run Friday night capped off a huge rally for the Pioneers.

After falling behind 4-0 in the top of the first, the Pioneers (2-1 in the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference; 5-3 overall) came charging back to beat Fred T. Foard 5-4 in eight innings at Watauga-High Field. The win moves WHS into a third place tie with Hickory, and it leaves the Pioneers just one game behind South Caldwell and Alexander Central for the No.1 seed.

"It just feels great to win like this," said Linville. "I was thinking about hitting it out when I was waiting on deck. He just threw me a high fastball, and I hit it.

"We've been playing together for a long time, and we have a lot of confidence in each other."

Both the Spartans and the Cougars won Friday night. South Caldwell defeated Hibriten 5-1; Alexander Central knocked off St. Stephens 10-4, thanks to a six-run explosion in the fifth inning. Both the Spartans and the Cougars are now 3-0 in league play, and the Cougars come to town Tuesday night.

But despite Linville's late-game heroics, it was sophomore Matt Proffitt, who took center stage. The youngster came on in relief for starting pitcher Ryan Turner in the second inning. After walking two of the first three men he faced, Proffitt settled down and turned in six strong innings of work.

Proffitt gave up an infield single in the third, walked four and struck out eight before he ran out of gas in the eighth.

"I knew he was getting tired at that point," said WHS coach Pete Hardee. "But he gave us a tremendous performance. The toughest thing to do as a pitcher is to come in like he did, not expecting it. But he did a great job keeping us in the game."

The Pioneers, who squandered numerous chances against star pitcher Robert McKinney of the Tigers, finally broke through in the seventh. They scored two runs on just one hit, and the Tigers, who made four errors on the night, lent a helping hand by committing two miscues in the frame.

Cal Hardee reached on a error, David Martin (who hit a two-run homer in the first) singled, Baker Stanley reached on a sacrifice/fielder's choice, when losing pitcher Kyle Yoder gambled and failed on his attempt to cutdown Hardee going to third.

That set the stage for Tyler Jones drove in a run with a routine ground ball. But the Tigers failed to turn the double -play, and made a poor throw on the relay to first. Hardee scored easily from third, and Martin, who was running hard on the play, scored all the way from second base to tie the game.

"I told them going into the bottom of the seventh that we had to find a way to get it done," said Hardee. "And we did it. This group plays hard and they battle all the time. It's a fun group."

Dylan Norris, who came on for Proffitt in the eight, pitched out of a bases-loaded, one-out jam

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in the top of the eighth and picked up his second win of the year. McKinney, who is being heavily recruited by numerous Division I schools and is believed to be a Major-League prospect, had a no-decision.

He went five innings, gave up two runs, both earned on five hits, he walked five and struck out 11. But he also threw 115 pitches.

We did a great job waiting him out," said Hardee. "This is a patient team at the plate. He's a great pitcher, but we made him work."

And for WHS, the Pioneers now find themselves back in the chase for a conference championship.

"It's great for us to come back and win after that tough loss at South (Caldwell) the other night," Linville said. "The seniors on this team have done a great job leading us this year. We're having a lot of fun, and we believe in each other."

Alexander Central comes to town Tuesday night in battle for first place. Our coverage of that game begins at 6 pm on Oldies 100.7 FM.