

Sabres Blank WHS, 7-0

Written by Mike Kelly
Sunday, 18 May 2014 12:53

The Watauga High baseball team saw its season come to an end Saturday night at Pioneer Field.

The Pioneers, riding a four-game winning streak, were halted in their tracks by winning pitcher Michael Smith of South Mecklenburg. The right hander scattered seven hits and struck out five in a complete-game 7-0 win in the second-round of the NCHSAA Class 4A state playoffs. It was also WHS' fifth shutout loss of the year.

The win moves South Meck (20-8) into the sectional finals at Charlotte-Providence Tuesday night. It's the fourth meeting between the schools this season (Providence owns a 2-1 lead in the series). For WHS (14-14), an impressive late-season run came to an end.

"We did a lot of good things this season," said WHS coach Pete Hardee. "From the Easter tournament on, we've played some very good baseball. But tonight, we just ran into a better team. These Charlotte teams are well coached. And to beat a team like this, you have to play better than them on that particular night. But we just couldn't get anything going tonight against (Smith). He moved the ball around, he threw strikes and his defense made the plays behind him."

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The Sabres gave Smith an early 3-0 lead in the first inning. Three consecutive singles by Brooks Kennedy, Smith and Harris Yett gave the Sabres a 2-0 lead. Yett was South's most productive hitter on Saturday going 3-4 with a pair of doubles and three RBI.

"Harris has been one of our biggest hitters all year," said South Meck coach Jon Tuscan, who led the Sabres to the Class 4A state championship last season. "He gives us a lot of power in that third spot (in the batting order). And getting the early lead really helped us. It gave Michael a cushion to work with on the mound. He looked very relaxed to start the game."

And Smith made it stand up. The right hander gave up one hit through the first three innings. The Pioneers finally found their groove against Smith by loading the bases on three consecutive singles in the fifth. But Smith retired Utah Jones on a ground ball to end the inning.

The Pioneers left eight men on, five in scoring position. They left six runners on in the last three innings.

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"And we couldn't score," Hardee said. "We just couldn't string enough hits together tonight. We had our chances, that's for sure. It's frustrating."

"They got some hits off Michael late in the game, but we didn't give up the big inning," Tuscan said. "We kept the them from hitting the ball in the gaps. To me, that was the difference in the game."

The Sabres pounded out 15 hits. Jeffrey Gainey (2-2) got the start and suffered the loss. The senior gave up four earned runs in 2.1 innings. Jones came on in relief and kept the Sabres in check until they scored two unearned runs in the seventh.

Jones, who came in with a 0.70 earned-run-average in the post-season, has only given up four runs, two earned in his last 14.2 innings of work (for a 0.98 ERA).

"That's the nice thing about this team," Hardee said. "We have a lot of guys coming back, and Utah is one of them. Our entire pitching staff (Jones, Matt Lambert and Hunter Isaacs) comes back except for Jeffrey. But Jeffrey had a big year for us. He pitched well tonight. I was hoping he could keep them off balance. He threw strikes, but they made the key hits when they had to, and we didn't."

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Kennedy was 3-4 with two runs scored and a stolen base; Smith was 2-4 with a double and an RBI; Eric Jones was 2-4 with a double; Max Bazin was 2-4 with a double and two runs scored; Christian Umphlett was 2-4 with two RBI.

Andy Critcher, playing his final game for the Pioneers, was 2-3 with a pair of singles.

"We've got the entire summer and this fall to get back to work," Hardee said. "It starts all over again next season. But if we can build on what we did late in the season, we could have ourselves a pretty good team next year."

NOTES: The Pioneers avoided their first losing season since 2007....South Meck is 2-0 lifetime against WHS....South Meck coach Jon Tuscan was a long time assistant coach with Danny Hignight (a former WHS assistant coach, 1998-2000) at Charlotte-Providence. In four years with the Sabres, Tuscan has won 77 games and a state championship....The temperature before Saturday's game was a brisk 54 degrees....Jesse Illich was 1-4 in his final game with the Pioneers; Carson Isaacs was 1-3....The Pioneers made their second error of the season in the outfield. Ironically, both of those errors came in right field this season.....The Pioneers made 57 errors on the year.....Since Pete Hardee took over as coach, the Pioneers have made the state playoffs 12 times (1998-2001; 2004; 2007-2012; 2014). They're 14-12 in the state playoffs with four sectional championship game appearances (1999, 2000, 2008, 2011), a sectional title (1999), and one regional appearance (1999)....The Pioneers were 3-7 at home this year.