

Working out the kinks



Jeffery Simmons photo
Hunter Adams, shown digging out a single during last week's home game, had five hits over the weekend in the Grand Slam Challenge. The Pioneers went 1-3 in the Murfreesboro tournament.

BY JEFFERY SIMMONS
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If the Grand Slam Challenge was supposed to be a measuring stick for the Pioneers, new WCHS coach Trice Powers now knows how far the program needs to go to compete with the highest level of competition in Tennessee.

Warren County finished the tournament 1-3, beating Hardin Valley last Thursday before dropping outings against Blackman, Oakland and Beech. The losses dropped the Pioneers to 2-4 overall, a record coach Powers believes could easily be reversed.

"I think, realistically, we should've been 2-2 or 3-1 in the tournament. We had a close game against Blackman that we probably should've pulled out," said Powers. "We played good teams and got good experience. When you play good teams, you have to bring it every day."

"You have to get used to it. You're going to be in a dog fight and be willing to hit back. We're getting there."

Jack Keele took an early starring role for the Pioneers, delivering a great two-way performance to top Hardin Valley. Keele got the win by throwing six strong innings, where the sophomore struck out five and allowed just three runs on three hits.

Though the pitching performance kept the Pioneers in the game, it was his skills at the plate that helped seal the victory.

Keele came to the plate in the top of the seventh with the game tied 3-3 after a RBI double from Brooks Helton. Keele jumped on the first pitch, sending it sailing over the left-field fence. It was a huge boost for the Pioneers, who were down to their last out when Helton doubled to tie the game.

Cole Estes was called on to close the game. After getting two quick outs, Estes loaded the bases with three straight free passes. He got out of the jam by inducing a game-ending flyball to second base.

The hard knocks started on Friday, when miscues helped Blackman win a pitcher's duel. Warren County fell 2-0, with Blackman scoring on a bases-loaded walk and a balk.

It was a crushing loss for the Pioneers, who got strong performances from Ethan Smith and Dylan Ward on the mound. The duo combined to hold Blackman to just two hits, but five free passes hurt the cause.

Giving teams extra base runners became a trend for the Pioneers, one Powers hopes reverses course soon.

"A big thing for us will be building more depth and being better on the bump," said Powers. "We didn't

have a starter get out of the third inning during the weekend. Teams are going to get hits, but they hurt more when there's free runners on base to come around."

Warren County finished Saturday with two losses in a doubleheader. The Pioneers fell 12-6 to Oakland, then lost 17-6 to Beech.

Oakland broke a 5-5 tie after three innings with three runs in the fourth, then five more in the fifth to pull away from the Pioneers. Beech did its damage in one inning, overcoming a six-run third inning by Warren County with 11 runs on its own in the bottom of the frame.

Helton and Hunter Adams led the offense in the tournament with five hits each, finishing with .455 and .417 averages, respectively. Helton also had a team-high four RBIs, while Keele had three.

Brandon Hennessee fell on the bump against Oakland, while freshman John Garrett took the loss on the bump against Beech.

The Pioneers were hoping to bounce back against Cookeville Monday, but the home game had to be postponed due to inclement weather. The early hope is the game can be played Thursday. Warren County was also set to travel to Rhea County Tuesday, but results were unavailable at press time.

NCAA has unexpected Sweet 16 field

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (AP) — After little went according to plan in the opening weekend of the NCAA Tournament, the bracket has a wildly different look for the Sweet 16 than many expected.

Out: Two 1-seeds (Virginia and Xavier) and a pair of 2-seeds (North Carolina and Cincinnati).

In: Two No. 11 seeds (Syracuse and Loyola-Chicago).

There are only seven of the top 16 seeds still alive for the regional rounds

Here's a look at the updated Final Four paths for the top remaining seeds:

EAST

This is the region that came closest to following the script.

Four of the top five seeds survived: No. 1 Villanova, No. 2 Purdue, No. 3 Texas Tech and No. 5 West Virginia. And the Wildcats (32-4) will have the shortest travel (about 315 miles) by heading to Boston as they pursue a second national title in three seasons.

"My good vibes are coming from how this team's playing, how unselfishly they play," Villanova coach Jay Wright said after Saturday's win against Alabama.

"Honestly, we don't care

where we play. Boston is a great town, old Big East town like Pittsburgh. We stir up old Big East feelings. We like that."

Villanova meets the Mountaineers (26-10) in one semifinal Friday, while the Boilermakers (30-6) face the Red Raiders (26-9) in the other.

MIDWEST

Consider this one an ACC Invitational.

Three of the four teams to advance to Omaha, Nebraska, are from the ACC: No. 2 Duke, No. 5 Clemson and No. 11 Syracuse. They'll join top-seeded Kansas, with

regional semifinals set for Friday.

The Jayhawks (29-7) are trying to return to the Final Four for the first time since 2012 after two straight regional-final losses. They'll face the Tigers (25-9), who are in their first NCAA Tournament since 2011 and their first Sweet 16 since 1997.

The Blue Devils (28-7) meet the Orange (23-13), who took out third-seeded Michigan State on Sunday.

WEST

Things were set to go to form Sunday, only to see top-seeded Xavier and No. 2 North Carolina lose. Now

Big Ten champion Michigan headlines the quartet in Los Angeles.

The third-seeded Wolverines (30-7) — who beat Houston on a last-second 3-pointer — will meet seventh-seeded Texas A&M (22-12) after the Aggies blew out the reigning champion Tar Heels in their home state.

Fourth-seeded Gonzaga (32-4) will face ninth-seeded Florida State (22-11) after the Seminoles' upset of the Musketeers.

SOUTH

This is where there was the most March Madness.

None of the top-four seeds advanced, the first time in tournament history that has happened in a region. So the games in Atlanta will now be headlined by 5-seed Kentucky (26-10).

The Wildcats (26-10) face another set of Wildcats on Thursday in ninth-seeded Kansas State (24-11), which ended UMBC's historic weekend in Charlotte.

The other game features 7-seed Nevada (29-7), which tied the tournament's second-biggest comeback by rallying from 22 down to beat No. 2 seed Cincinnati. The Wolf Pack faces No. 11 seed Loyola-Chicago (30-5).

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Rinne gets 40th win, Preds beat Sabres

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — Predators stalwart Pekka Rinne briefly stopped to marvel when informed of the elite NHL goaltending company he joined in becoming a three-time 40-game winner — and after a shutout, no less.

Only six players — Martin Brodeur and Terry Sawchuk, among them — had previously done that.

"When you say that, it sounds pretty cool," Rinne said, after stopping 35 shots in a 4-0 win over the Buffalo Sabres on Monday night. "Those guys are legends of this game. They've done so much not only for the game of hockey but for the position of being a goalie. That's great. That's a credit to my teammates, big time, and also my coaching staff."

Rinne has been nearly unbeatable in winning his 11th straight game and improving to 40-9-4. And

the 12-year veteran is carrying the NHL-leading Predators along with him in approaching numerous franchise milestones.

Nashville set a team record by extending its point streak to 15 games (14-0-1). And the Predators won their ninth consecutive road game as part of a run in which they're 12-0-3 in their past 15 to break yet another team record.

"He's unbelievable," teammate Ryan Johansen said of Rinne. "In our opinion, he's been the MVP for us."

The rest of the Predators have been no slouches

during a stretch in which they haven't lost in regulation since a 3-1 setback against Detroit on Feb. 17.

Johansen and Mike Fisher scored goals 4:34 apart in the second period. Filip Forsberg and Ryan Hartman then sealed it by scoring in the final four minutes.

First-year Sabres coach Phil Housley could only tip his hat to Nashville, where he spent the previous four seasons as an assistant. Though the final score didn't reflect it, Housley was pleased with how the Sabres, last in the Eastern Conference, held their own against the Predators for mostly two periods.

"I can't fault the way our guys played. I thought they brought their best game," Housley said. "One thing I'd like to see our guys do better is stop in front of the net and start pounding it, whacking at some loose pucks there."

Then again, Housley is all too familiar with how well Rinne can play when he gets into a groove.

"If we could rattle him early and get him off his game a little bit, that's the time we've got to take advantage," Housley said. "But once he settles in, he's tough to beat."

Buffalo's Jack Eichel burst up the left side and behind the Predators' defense to drive across the crease only to have his shot stopped by Rinne's left pad four minutes in. Rinne also got an assist from teammate Kevin Fiala, who got his stick out to stop Justin Bailey's attempt to tap in a bouncing puck in the crease.

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