

May 18, 2023

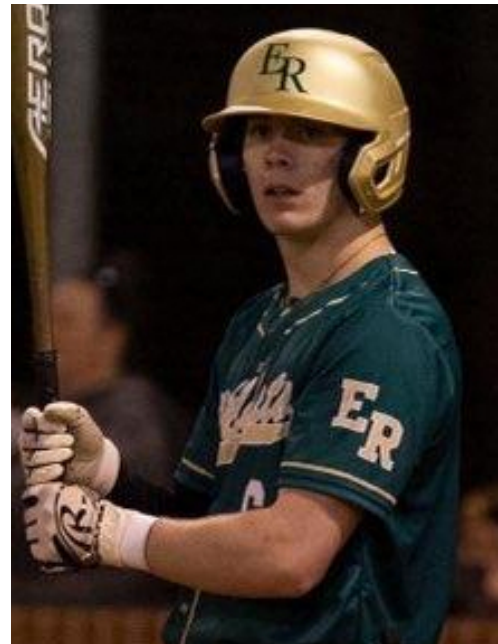
By Dennis Garcia  
SportsTone.net

RAMSEUR - It was April 6 and the Eastern Randolph High School varsity baseball team had just suffered an 11-1 setback to Apex Friendship at the ZooKeepers Showdown to fall to 3-11 on the season. Senior Stratton Barwick, who was being interviewed for a story, said he had no doubt despite the current struggles, that the Wildcats had the talent to make a deep run in the state playoffs.

Boy, was he right.

The Wildcats, who finished the regular season 4-17, including a 2-10 mark inside the Piedmont Athletic Conference, are making that strong run in the state 1-A playoffs, the latest victory coming Tuesday night when ER earned a third-round 3-1 win over Highland Tech. Seeded 21st in the West Region, the Wildcats had gone on the road and disposed of No. 12 Mount Airy 9-3, No. 5 Hayesville 5-2 in a most unusual occurrence and then captured the win over No. 13 Highland Tech. All this from a team that won just four total games during the entire regular season.

"With the season they had and kind of where we were at, they could have easily packed it in," first-year head coach Brent Haynes said. "We could have just gone out of the first round and packed it up. They just keep coming to the field and play and they haven't quit. It's paying dividends."



Though the Wildcats were 4-17 during the regular season, things could have been much different. ER lost four one-run games and 10 of their losses were by three runs or less.

"We have some crazy stat where 14 of the 17 losses, we had the lead in the sixth inning," Haynes said. "We are finishing games now."

The Wildcats have used stellar pitching in the playoffs as Samuel Asbill, Barwick and Lucas Smith had led the charge. Asbill earned the win in the first-round victory and then the Wildcats had to overcome some adversity before claiming the win in round two. Leading 2-1 in the fifth in Hayesville, the skies opened and a heavy rain forced the game to be suspended until the following day at noon. ER, which had made the long trip on Thursday for the Friday game, was forced to spend another night in a hotel before returning to finish the game.

"We stayed about 15 minutes away from Hayesville and on the way to the game, the bottom dropped out," Haynes said. "The field was under water. They got the field ready and then during the game, the rain came again. Then their coach said it would have to be suspended. I talked to our guys and they were really upset. They were ready to play. I told them this is part of it. You are going to have obstacles. Let's go spend another night in the hotel and come back tomorrow ready."

They sure did. ER quickly scored three more runs for a 5-1 lead and held on for the 5-2 win.

"They came out with some fire and some energy and scored some runs and then Smith came in and shut the door," Haynes said. "The perseverance and toughness they are showing ...."

The Wildcats started Tuesday night's third-round game more than an hour after the scheduled starting time because of rain, but behind Asbill had a 3-1 lead heading toward the bottom of the seventh. A heavy rain storm forced the teams to leave the field and it took an hour-and-a-half before the Wildcats were able to finish off the 3-1 win.



"I just said it's Eastern Randolph and nothing comes easy for Eastern Randolph so let's go out there and show them why we are so tough," Haynes said.

The Wildcats have had to be tough, competing in the ultra-talented PAC.

"I think we played the hardest schedule in 1-A baseball," Haynes said. "Playing in our conference, you see good arms and teams who can swing it. It prepares you for 1-A baseball. There are no days off in the PAC and that's definitely beneficial when it comes to the playoffs."

ER will play either Cherryville or Union Academy in the next round. Those two teams have yet to play because of weather difficulties. The earliest those two teams could play is Thursday night. Whichever team advances, Eastern Randolph will be ready. Just like it has been throughout these 1-A playoffs.