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ASHEBORO - Whenever a high school baseball team participates in a holiday tournament, it gives that team the opportunity to find out a few more things as well as having the chance to improve.

The ZooKeepers Showdown was set up last October with the opportunity for four Randolph County teams – Southwestern Randolph, Eastern Randolph, Providence Grove and Wheatmore - to battle four non-Randolph County teams - Jordan-Matthews, North Moore, Apex Friendship and Chapel Hill - in a three-day event, using a format formally used in the ACC-Big 10 Basketball Challenge.



Although the third and final day of the 2023 event was rained out, teams spent two days facing unfamiliar opponents with mixed results. All four Randolph County teams finished 1-1 in the tournament, while the four non-Randolph teams finished with a cumulative record of 4-4 as well.

Chapel Hill had two thrilling wins, rallying for a 12-10 win over SWR and then jumping into a five-run lead over Wheatmore before holding on to win 6-4, while Apex Friendship also went 2-0 in the tournament, winning a couple of run-rule decisions, 10-0 over Providence Grove and 11-1 over Eastern Randolph. J-M and North Moore each went 0-2 in tournament play.

As far as Randolph County teams, SWR had a couple of close battles, one finishing with a disappointing result and one with a big sigh of relief. The Cougars led 10-5 over Chapel Hill on the first day of the tournament before seeing the Tigers rally for seven runs in the sixth inning for a 12-10 victory. Then, the Cougars had a comfortable 7-2 lead after four innings against North Moore, and still led 10-5 entering the bottom of the seventh before the Mustangs rallied with a pair of walks and four straight hits to close to within 10-9. With the tying run on third and the winning run on second, sophomore Jonah Campbell came in and struck out two of the four batters he faced to finally secure the win for SWR.

"I thought overall, we were pretty consistent with what we did," SWR coach Ethan Marsh said. "We were offensively consistent against two quality opponents. We had the lead the first night and couldn't finish the job. I am impressed with where we are. There are things we can do a lot better, but we had two quality opponents and we split with those two teams."

The Cougars did score a total of 20 runs in the two games.

"This is one of the best teams offensively I have had, so I'm not going to just stick nine guys out there every night, we are going to rotate and ride the guy who has the hot hand," Marsh said. "Overall, they did a good job and we put eight or nine guys on the mound to give them some work."

Kamden Carter had three hits and three RBIs in the second game, while Eli Gravely, Grant Kirk, Austin Harvell and Zach Scruggs had two hits each.

In the opening loss, Gravely had three hits, including a home run, and Kirk and Tyler Parks had two hits each.

Eastern Randolph experienced mixed results as well as the Wildcats recorded a 13-5 win over North Moore before falling to Apex Friendship 11-1.

Against North Moore, ER scored seven runs in the fifth and three more in the sixth for a big lead and rolled from there. Pierce Leonard had two triples, two runs scored and four RBIs, while Ethan Frye, Alex Kivett and Lucas Smith each had two hits. Kivett scored twice and Smith three times for the Wildcats, who registered 12 hits in the contest. That win represented the fifth straight for the Wildcats at SWRHS as they won all three Easter Tournament games last year there and topped the Cougars in a PAC game the week prior.

"When we played North Moore, we kinda clicked," said first-year ER coach Brent Haynes. "We got hits in clutch situations and made pitches in situations. Going into the Apex Friendship game, I knew it would be an uphill battle. They had an army and we had 10 players. We leave six runners on in the first three innings and if we could have gotten some hits then, who knows? We didn't give up and had some long at-bats. We battled and we're doing things that we may not have done earlier in the season."

Against Apex Friendship, ER had its win streak at SWRHS snapped as it was held in check by Apex Friendship. ER received an RBI single from Kahlin Graham in the third for its only run. Graham had two of ER's five hits in the contest.

Wheatmore coach Trey Byrd had to have been proud of the effort the Warriors gave as WHS recorded a 9-0 win over J-M in the first day and battled 4-A Chapel Hill down to the wire in the second game. The Warriors trailed 5-0 at one point before rallying to make it 6-4. WHS put the tying run in scoring position in the seventh inning, but couldn't find a way to bring him home.

"Really, I just wanted to see us continue to battle," Byrd said. "It was easy for us to shut down when adversity hit, but we continued to battle and we fought to the last inning and the last pitch. We need to continue to fight and scrape out our at-bats."

About half of the Warriors' roster consists of underclassmen.

"With them being as young as they are, it's that more promising of a future," Byrd said.

Mason Rich had two hits and two RBIs, Jake Parks had a double, RBI and run and Sean Jennings got the win against J-M, giving up just three hits with seven strikeouts in six innings.

Parks had two hits, Clay Hill had a couple of hits and Rowan Wagner had two hits in the narrow loss to Chapel Hill..

Providence Grove was involved in a pair of shutouts, falling 10-0 to Apex Friendship in five innings as Friendship's Luke Hemreck didn't allow a hit. He walked two and struck out eight.

"The first game we played, we faced a really good pitcher who was around the plate and kept the ball down and we couldn't get anything started," PG coach Glen Hunt said.

The Patriots rebounded with a resounding 13-0 win over J-M in the tournament's final game on Thursday afternoon.

PG recorded 13 hits in its second game, with Joe Coltrane getting three and Andrew Canter and Josh Ward recording two each. Lemuel Coltrane and Tyler Foust drove in three each and Canter got the win on the mound, surrendering six hits with seven strikeouts.

"We hit the ball much better and we jumped on them better," Hunt said. "Andrew Canter had a great day on the mound and Andrew Thomas made some nice defensive plays. It was good to see us hit the ball. Hopefully we can take what we did (Thursday) and take it into next week."