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By Dennis Garcia
SportsTone.net

Having an experienced, overpowering pitcher will certainly give a high school softball team an advantage over every other team in its conference. Except this year in the Piedmont Athletic Conference as the league features three pitchers who certainly have the talent to lead their teams deep into the postseason.

The problem this year, however, is because the state high school playoffs have been reduced to just half the number of participants from previous years due to the pandemic, one of those teams won't even qualify for the playoffs.

Eastern Randolph's Savannah Beaver, Randleman's Sarah Rice and Providence Grove's Emma Mazzarone are all enjoying incredibly impressive campaigns and each time these teams played one another, it has been an event.

"I really believe that this conference has three teams that could win the state championship," ER coach Lavette Graham said of his team, the Tigers and the Patriots. "In Randolph County, it's not unusual to have two dominant pitchers, we've had that for the last 15 years or so. However, having three pitchers of their caliber is rare."



Savannah Beaver. Photo provided.

The head-to-head meetings between the three teams is proof. Heading into Monday night's battle with the Tigers, the Wildcats were a perfect 10-0 in league play, including two nail-biting wins over PG - 3-0 and 3-2 - and a thrilling 2-1 win over the Tigers.

Randleman (9-1) lost the first meeting with ER, but owns a 3-2 win over PG in eight innings and a 1-0 victory over the Patriots.

Any of those contests could very well have gone the other way.

"Every time we play, we knew it was going to be a one-run game and unfortunately, we came out on the short end this year," PG coach Tim Brown said. "The good thing is that Emma is a sophomore and those other two pitchers are seniors."

RHS coach Jeff Webster said there's no doubt the three hurlers are unique.

"It's very unusual actually, the calibre of all three," Webster said. "They are probably three of the better pitchers in the state. From one angle, it makes us better because we get to face great pitching in order to get us ready. This year, though, only two teams go to the playoffs and that is unfortunate."

ER's Beaver enters this week's action with a record of 9-1. She has pitched 47 innings, giving up just 22 hits and seven earned runs. She has a 1.04 ERA and has fanned 66 in those 47 innings pitched with just four walks.

"She basically is the engine of our ship," Graham said. "She is our starter and finisher. She is a captain for a reason. We go pretty much the way Savannah goes. She is our key."

Rice is 4-1 and has given up just four earned runs in 34 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings pitched. She has just six walks while fanning 62. She has allowed only 16 hits.

"She's probably the most athletic player I have ever coached," Webster said. "She literally can play any position. She can pitch, catch, bat right-handed, bat left-handed, she can slap, she can bunt. She is as versatile a player as I have ever coached. What makes her special is her approach to the game. She doesn't ever seem to get rattled. She keeps it all in stride and is even-keel."



Sarah Rice. Photo provided.



Emma Mazzarone. Photo provided.

PG's Mazzarone, a left-hander, has hurled 61 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings, giving up just 23 hits and nine earned runs for a 1.02 ERA. She has fanned an incredible 112 batters. She has nine complete games and a pair of shutouts.

"She is strong," Brown said. "She does her pitching lessons, plays in the summer and is a strong strikeout pitcher."

Mazzarone has two full seasons remaining and there's little doubt she will be one that carries the strong pitching banner in the county.

Three great pitchers and three great teams, all in the same conference. It doesn't happen all that often. But it has this year in the PAC.