

May 5, 2023

By Dennis Garcia
SportsTone.net

RANDLEMAN - It may have been a bit of a different route this season, but the Randleman High School varsity baseball team reached a familiar destination. The Tigers, who captured their 14th straight Piedmont Athletic Conference regular-season title this season, added another PAC Tournament crown to their storied history with a 4-0 win over Trinity Thursday night at Brookshire Field.

With the Tigers being tested throughout the conference season and then once again in this year's tournament, the championships may have been a bit sweeter than some of the previous titles.



Tigers celebrating a PAC Tournament Championship, May 4, 2023.



Tigers' head coach Jake Smith.

"We lost two games in the conference this year, played some close games and had some adversity," veteran RHS coach Jake Smith said. "It's all about the kids. They bought in and didn't panic."

There were times this year they certainly could have.

Last year, the Tigers had little trouble during the regular season or the tournament, finishing with a perfect 12-0 league record while outsourcing conference foes 146-11. RHS then posted PAC Tournament wins of 12-2 over Uwharrie Charter and 16-0 over Trinity.

This year, after the graduation of a good portion of their offense, the Tigers finished 10-2 in PAC play, outsourcing foes 86-26. Then in this year's tournament, Randleman was one strike away from being eliminated by Providence Grove in the semifinals before Seth Way's two-out, two-strike, two-run homer tied the game and RHS went on to

post a thrilling 4-3 win in eight innings.

In the title game against Trinity, the game was scoreless through three innings before starting pitcher Austin Lemons blasted a two-run homer for a lead the Tigers would never relinquish. Lemons said this title was just as sweet as the previous ones, but it may have been a bit more rewarding.

"I wouldn't say on an excitement level it was more exciting because every year is just as exciting as the next one, but I feel it's a little more rewarding knowing a lot of guys had to step up and fill big shoes this year," said Lemons, who finished with a two-hitter and eight strikeouts in six innings of work. "A lot of these guys haven't played a lot before this year. I haven't played a lot before this year. But we all stepped up and played big roles this year and we were able to pull it out."



Another one of those players who stepped up in his senior year is Chesney Welch. Welch's solo homer leading off the fifth pushed the Tigers' lead to 3-0.

"It's definitely a lot more special," Welch said. "This year, people kind of counted us out because of the amount of guys we lost and we kind of took it personal. We work our tails off every day up there (in the batting cage) and here on the field. We weren't going to let anyone take anything away from us because we know how hard we work."

Hunter Atkins said it has been a different year, but his team has adjusted well..

"Last year, it was like every game we knew our hitting was going to be there," said Atkins, who walked three times and scored a run in the title game. "This year we are pitching dependent. It's a big change, but you still have to play baseball when it comes down to it."

RHS, which had a team ERA of just over a run per game, got even stronger Thursday with the return of Drake Purvis, who missed the entire season with an injury. He pitched a scoreless seventh in his first appearance, recording a strikeout for the final out of the game.

The excitement he and his team displayed after the game showed the Tigers are ready to make a strong run for a third consecutive state championship.



Randleman baseball team following their 4-0 win pver Trinity in the 2023 PAC Tournament finals.