

May 11, 2023

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CLIMAX - In what had to be one of the most exciting, thrilling and heart-pounding first-round state 2-A tournament softball games Tuesday night, 15th-seeded Providence Grove recorded a 1-0 win in eight innings over 18th seeded West Caldwell to advance to second-round action.

PG's reward for defeating a team that was 21-6 heading into the playoffs: Another date with Piedmont Athletic Conference champion Southwestern Randolph.

PG coach Tim Brown and SWR coach Chad Whitson agreed they would much rather play someone else than a conference foe in second round action, but "it is what it is," so these two teams will battle for a fourth time Friday night at SWRHS with a berth into the third round on the line.

"It is what it is, but go straight RPI if you are going to use RPI at all," PG coach Tim Brown said, who has seen his team lose 5-0, 7-1 and 7-0 against the Cougars, the first two in the regular season and the third in the PAC Tournament championship. "We had five teams jump us because of the conference tournament and I promise you there isn't a conference that is anywhere near what ours is. We were 10 in RPI before the tournament and 15 after. It doesn't make sense."

The Patriots advanced mainly due to the pitching of senior Emma Mazzarone, who fanned a career-high 19 batters in the eight-inning win. She walked two and allowed just one hit, a one-out single in the top of the seventh inning.

Meanwhile, the second-ranked Cougars moved into second-round action after an easy 10-0 win over East Davidson in five innings. That set up another date between the two Randolph County and conference members.

"I'm not really crazy about it, but it is what it is," Whitson said. "I think it should have been set up where we would meet somewhere later down the road. But you have to play with whoever they put in front of you."



Patriots senior left-hander Emma Mazzarone.



Left-Right: Alley Lowe, Chad Whitson, Maddie Varner and Carleigh Whitson meet during the PAC Tournament Final. May 4, 2023.

Whitson admitted he doesn't fully understand the complete seeding system - not many people truly do.

"There are seedings and rankings and so much goes into it, more than I can keep up with," Whitson said. "But as strong as our conference is, you would think we wouldn't meet in the second round. But like I said, you have to play who they tell you to play."

As strong as the PAC has been this year in softball, with four of

the five teams qualifying advancing to second-round action by a 56-0 combined score (Uwharrie Charter and Eastern Randolph in 1-A and SWR and PG in 2-A), it sure makes sense to put these conference powers in places where they wouldn't meet so early. A total of three PAC teams qualified for the 2-A tournament, which means it wouldn't have been difficult to separate those teams in the overall bracket.

It would have meant a bit more work for the NCHSAA, but it would make the tournament far more enjoyable and give the PAC the opportunity to prove it was and is the top conference in softball.

Instead, two very familiar foes will meet again Friday night. And although the Cougars have won all three prior meetings, Whitson has already told his team those wins don't mean anything.

"We can't go into this lightly even if we beat them three times or not because you are facing Emma Mazzarone, one of the best pitchers

in the state," Whitson said. "I do kind of agree that beating a team three times in one season is tough, but a fourth time is new territory for me. I never played a team four



PG's Mazzarone applying the tag at home plate to SWR's Carleigh Whitson in the PAC Tournament final. May 4, 2023.

times in one season. I do know that we are going to have to bring our "A" game."

This contest will once again feature two of the top pitchers in the state squaring off against one another. Mazarone is 13-8 with a 0.82 ERA. She has pitched 136 innings, surrendering just 60 hits. She has walked 42 and fanned 267.

SWR sophomore hurler Macie Crutchfield is also having a sensational season. She is 10-1 with a 0.43 ERA. She has pitched 97 innings, having given up just 36 hits and six earned runs. She has walked 19 and struck out 165.

A great pitching matchup for sure. I just wish it would have taken place been later in the state tournament.



Cougars pitcher Macie Crutchfield.