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ASHEBORO - When the head coach of a varsity high school sport decides to host a holiday tournament, the participating teams must first be determined. Then there's the task of putting together the schedule - which teams will be pitted against one another.



When Southwestern Randolph High School softball coach Toby Strider put together the very first Cougar Classic presented by Athletic Training and Conditioning this week, he had to decide which opponents his team would face in the three-day event. There are obviously two theories of thinking. One is to give his team easier competition, assuring a successful tournament. The other is the one Strider chose.

He pitted his Cougar team against the three highest-ranked teams in the field and his team responded quite impressively. SWR posted a first-night 9-8 win over Randleman, followed that up with an 11-1 win over South Stokes and capped the tournament with a thrilling 4-3 victory last Thursday over High Point Christian Academy, which was ranked third in the state among all teams regardless of class or affiliation.

"I wanted to play the three highest ranked teams we could play," Strider said after his team improved to 12-3 after the three victories. "I made sure we played Randleman and High Point Christian (a combined 22-2 entering the tournament) and South Stokes was ranked seventh when I looked. I want to play as tough of a schedule as I can."

That's the route his players wanted to travel as well.

"I feel like playing harder teams would make us better," said freshman catcher Jada Freeland, who had three hits against HPCA. "I would rather play a harder team and lose than play a team and blow them out of the water."

The Cougars recorded nine hits against HPCA, also known as the Cougars, as SWR handed HPCA just its second loss of the season. The only other team HPCU has lost to this season was Randleman, and that was a 4-3 decision back on March 19.

Randleman, which defeated the Cougars 12-4 on March 31 during the regular season, was one of a number of high-profile programs in the tournament.

"It builds our competitiveness," said SWR senior infielder Kami Dunn, who not only made a number of outstanding defensive plays throughout the tournament, but smacked a three-run fifth-inning home run against HPCA to give SWR a 4-2 advantage. "We needed that when we got beat by Randleman. We needed to step up and it makes us focus harder. I feel like these three games this week were a whole different team than the one from last week."

After a thrilling 9-8 win over Randleman, which evened the season series at 1-1, the Cougars had very little trouble with South Stokes as they recorded an 11-1 win. Thursday night's battle was between a pair of titans and the game didn't disappoint the large crowd on hand to see the tournament finale.

With Katelyn West on the mound for the Cougars, HPCA used a two-run homer in the second inning by Allie Winfree for a 2-0 lead.

A walk to West, a single by Freeland and an error allowed the Cougars to pull to within 2-1 in the fourth and SWR continued its offensive assault in the fifth inning when Nauticca Parrish singled, Bristol Marine's fielder's choice grounder left both runners on base when a throwing error occurred. Then Dunn smashed her three-run homer over the centerfield fence, her third hit of the game for a 4-2 lead.

"It started my first at-bat, I knew watching her she had movement," Dunn said of HPCA junior pitcher Paisley Dixon, who was 12-1 with a 1.09 ERA and 90 strikeouts in 58 innings coming into the contest. "She works up a lot in the count. I told myself and the girls before the game to be patient, don't panic. If it gets on you, let it get on you because you can hit a harder ball if you're late than if you are early. In my first at-bat, she threw a changeup and I took it for a strike and I told myself if she throws it again, that's the pitch I'm hitting and that's the pitch I'm sitting on all night."

She sat on one in the fifth inning and deposited it deep over the centerfield fence.

"It was very exciting," she said of her trip around the bases, her second home run in the tournament. "I obviously didn't go up there... Toby told me after I played the Randleman game my first at-bat in the Randleman game, 'you're not a home run hitter and you got lucky.' I'm just trying to put a hard swing on it."

West went the distance on the mound and the Cougars were steady defensively, including turning a double play in the seventh inning when, with a runner on first, shortstop Maddie Strider caught a vicious line drive hit right at her and her throw to



*SWR senior Kami Dunn.*

first doubled up the runner. That became even more important when Kerri Langfitt hit a solo home run to make it 4-3.

West allowed seven hits with three walks and one strikeout.

"I know how good of a team they are," West said. "I have seen them play, I was prepared. I was really, really nervous to start, but as it progressed, I got better and better and better. It calmed my nerves knowing I have the defense behind me. It's a de-stresser. I throw what I need to and let them get the outs."

The tournament featured a total of nine games with local squads SWR finishing 3-0, Randleman 2-1 and Providence Grove 1-2.

The SWR defense was stellar with Bristol Marine, Parrish and Mary-Kate Marion manning the outfield and Maylee Strider and Alyssa Harris at the infield corners. Maddie Strider at short, Dunn at second, Freeland behind the plate and West in the circle combined to play errorless ball.

"There were some good softball teams here this week," Toby Strider said. "And there were some good players on that field tonight for both teams."

The Cougars return to Four Rivers Conference action this week with a key home-and-home series with Northwood. The two teams are tied for first in the conference heading into Tuesday night's game with 5-1 league marks.



*SWR senior Katelyn West.*