



April 26, 2024

By Dennis Garcia
SportsTone.net

ASHEBORO - In the first two years as a member of the Piedmont Athletic Conference, the Uwharrie Charter Academy softball team showed improvement. The Eagles went from 6-6 in PAC play in 2022 to 7-5 in 2023. The overall win total skyrocketed from eight wins in 2022 to 15 in 2023.



But despite improving even more this season, the Eagles had been unable to defeat Southwestern Randolph, which has a long, rich softball tradition. Five straight games, five straight losses by a combined 28-8 run differential. UCA had never beaten the Cougars. That is, until Thursday night as the Eagles scored twice in the top of the seventh with two outs to claim a 4-3 win over the Cougars at SWRHS.



With both teams entering the final regular-season contest 10-1 in league play, the win meant a PAC regular-season championship for the Eagles, who improved to 11-1 in league action and 16-2-1 overall.

The loss was the third of the week for SWR as the Cougars, who also lost to Oak Grove and Mount Pleasant earlier in the week, will enter PAC Tournament action next week with a 10-2 PAC mark and a 12-6 overall record.

"This means the world," UCA first-year coach Haven Marine said. "I talked to the seniors and they were discouraged. They talk about never being able to beat Southwest. I told them we are building something here and let's not forget that."

The Eagles have used stellar pitching and solid hitting throughout this entire season and the win over the Cougars featured the same. Hurler Mollie Bulla pitched a complete game, giving up five hits, just one earned run, one walk (intentional) and 12 strikeouts.

"Mollie is the best pitcher in the conference," Marine said. "She is the only pitcher who calls her own game. I trust her and believe in her enough, I let her have it. The only thing I had to tell her was to believe you are the big dog. Believe you are the best. Appalachian State is getting a stud."

Down 3-2 in the seventh, the Eagles used an error and a walk to put two runners on with two outs. Aubrie Kauffman then looped a short fly just over the infield that glanced off the glove of the second baseman and into right field, allowing both runners to cross the plate.

"Got a pop up, but sort of in no-man's land and it is what it is," SWR coach Toby Strider said. "Nothing you can do about it. I'm really proud of these girls. We are going to the tournament and then the playoffs and I wouldn't want to go with anyone else but the girls on this team."

Bulla retired the side in order in the seventh to preserve the win.

Both teams scored in the first when UCA's Kenzie Hill walked, stole second, went to third on a wild pitch and scored on a sacrifice bunt by Emory Johnson.

SWR answered when Madelyn Smith singled, stole second, advanced to third on a throw from the infield and scored on a passed ball.

An RBI double by Hill gave the Eagles a 2-1 lead in the fifth, but SWR scored twice in the bottom of the inning on a two-base error that plated two runs. The Cougars held that 3-2 lead until the seventh.

"It hurts," Strider said. "In a game like this, half of the people are happy and half of the people are hurting and we're hurting tonight."

SWR hurler Macie Crutchfield took the loss. She went the distance, allowing eight hits, two earned runs, one walk and six strikeouts.

The Eagles remained the No. 1 seed in the West in the RPI ratings and advanced to the semifinals of the PAC Tournament. The Cougars will host a first-round game Monday.