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ASHEBORO - When the East bracket was released for the NCHSAA state 4-A softball tournament a few weeks ago, there were a lot of fans in Randolph County who were hoping for a regional final series between powerhouses Southwestern Randolph and Randleman. Two Randolph County teams with incredible talent, two Randolph County teams having sensational seasons, two Randolph County teams which have split the first two meetings this season and two Randolph County teams located just a hop, skip and a jump away from one another.

Could it get any better?

But there were mountains that had to be climbed and hurdles that had to be cleared before those two teams could meet again with a berth to the state 4-A championship on the line. Well, the mountains have been climbed and the hurdles have been cleared as the Tigers and Cougars begin a best two-out-of-three series to determine which will represent Randolph County in the upcoming state 4-A championship series.

Game 1 is scheduled for Tuesday at RHS with Game 2 set for Wednesday at SWR. A third and deciding game, if necessary, is tentatively scheduled for Friday at RHS. All games have a 7 p.m. start time.

Of the four teams remaining in 4-A, two are from Randolph County.

"I think it speaks tremendously well for Randolph County athletics," said SWR coach Toby Strider, who guided his 2024 team to the state 2-A title.

"Here you have Randleman and Southwestern in the Final Four of softball. It's great for our schools, great for our communities. It should be just an exciting week of softball."

The Cougars, the regular season and tournament champions from the Four Rivers Conference, will be meeting the regular-season champions of the Piedmont Athletic Conference - which didn't have a postseason tournament - for the third time this



season. The two met on March 31 with the Tigers recording a 12-4 home victory before the Cougars posted a 9-8 win on April 7 during the Cougars' Easter Tournament. SWR is 21-4 overall and enters the regional finals with a five-game winning streak, while the Tigers are 25-2 and winners of 12 straight.

SWR, the third seed, posted playoff wins of 9-3 over North Lenoir, 9-1 over Roanoke Rapids and 4-1 over a powerful Central Davidson squad on Friday night. RHS, the top seed, defeated Eastern Wayne 11-0, Nash Central 15-0 and East Duplin 9-5 on Friday.

"You couldn't make this stuff up," said RHS interim coach Josh Ashby. "Southwest has been a rival for quite some time. I know the coaches, and the majority of the players I have known since they were little. If you're going to make it to the state championship, what better way to make it than to have two Randolph County teams go toe to toe."

Both teams have incredible pitching, with Randleman junior Kinzie Ivey a three-year starter in the circle and SWR's Katelyn West taking over the top spot and thriving.

Both teams have potent lineups, solid defense and a lot of experience in big-game situations.

"I think if you're Toby Strider and you're looking at Randleman, they don't have a lot of weaknesses, and if you're Josh Ashby and you're looking at Southwestern Randolph, they don't have a lot of weaknesses," Strider said. "They are a good ball team. They have good pitching and they hit it throughout the lineup. They are very similar to us. They are a very talented team and it is what it is. You are supposed to be playing good teams in the Final Four."

Ashby said he's impressed with the Cougars.

"It's good coaching and they have that one thing you can't teach," he said. "That's the fight in the dog. They don't know how to quit. It's pitch by pitch. They know how to scrap and you can't let down. You have to play a clean game."

These two teams certainly know each other well.

"They have played one another for the middle school championship, they have played each other the next year for a championship, up until this year they have been in the same conference," Strider said. "Our seniors have been in their conference for three of the four years. At this point of the season, you're not working on pitching, hitting or fielding bunts. At this time of the season you just go out and play. It's not rocket science at this point. I have said from Day 1 one of these two teams will be playing for a state championship."

One will do just that.