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HOLLY SPRINGS - Jake Hunter may not have pitched as many innings in his junior year as he did as a freshman and sophomore for the Uwharrie Charter Academy varsity baseball team, but when it comes to clinching state championships, there is no one better.

Hunter hurled a complete-game 6-0 victory over Perquimans Saturday night at Ting Stadium to clinch the third consecutive NCHSAA state 1-A championship for the Eagles. Hunter surrendered just five hits to a team that averaged 9.4 runs per game entering the state championship series and helped UCA capture the final two games in the best-of-three state championship.

It was the second straight year Hunter was named the most valuable player of the state championship series.

"It's a feeling you never forget," Hunter said. "Not many people get a chance to play for a team that wins back-to-back-to-back state championships. As soon as you get the last out, everyone rushing on the field, the fans chanting. It's crazy."

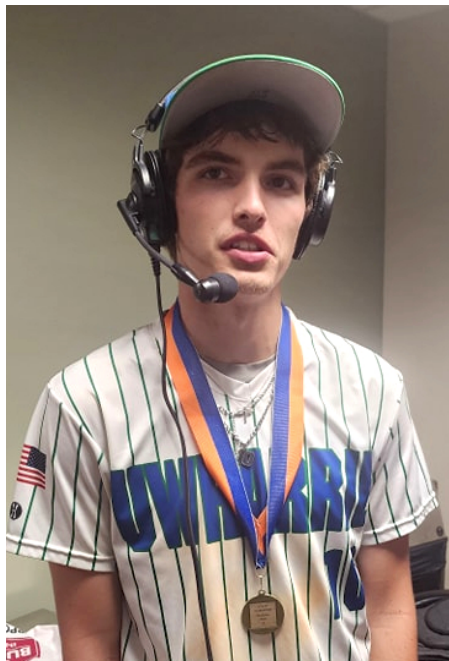


Hunter capped an impressive freshman campaign with an 8-1 complete-game win over North Moore as the Eagles captured the 2023 title. He then hurled a complete-game 6-1 win over Northside-Pinetown to give the Eagles a sweep in the 2024 state championship series.

How did he follow that? With a complete-game shutout win in the third and deciding game this season.

It's been a season that has certainly been different for Hunter. In his first two seasons, he combined with Brett Smith to form a most potent one-two pitching punch. This year, senior Logun Wilkins, who had some incredible performances last year on the mound, grabbed that No. 2 pitching role behind Smith. Hunter was still a key performer on the mound, but his innings dwindled. Entering the state championship series, he was 3-4 with a 3.59 ERA in 39 innings of work. Wilkins was 7-3 with a 0.59 ERA in 71 innings and Smith 6-2 with a 1.59 ERA in 62 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings of work.

Smith gave up four runs in his first two innings in Game 1, but settled down to throw four shutout frames and Wilkins helped guide the team to a 6-4 win in Game 2 to force Game 3.



*IA Baseball Championship
Tournament MVP Jake Hunter.*

"I kind of new coming into the regionals (a two-out-of-three series) that we have three really good arms and I was kinda on the back end this year," said Hunter, who was the Eagles' leadoff hitter and stellar shortstop when not on the mound. "I just had to play my position at shortstop and get that win and then go to the mound. You can't let the moment get too big for you. That's where I struggled earlier this year. Bad umpires, I let get to me. Fans, I let get to me. I came out tonight and did my best and my best was pretty good."

That it was as he faced more than four batters in an inning just once all game long. He finished with two walks and five strikeouts, stranding seven Pirate runners on the bases.

"That is the Jake of old and he absolutely dominated," said third-year head coach Rob Shore, who has led the Eagles to the state title in each of his three years. "He knew coming into the series he would get Game 3 and he was mentally prepared. I think he wanted the ball. If we win in two, great

but I'm not sure (Perquimans) knew we had another kid who could pound the zone and throw three or four pitches for strikes."

Hunter certainly benefited from a defense that made a number of solid plays behind him. The UCA defense wasn't perfect, but they turned a key double play to close out the fifth inning after the first two batters of the inning reached on a walk and a single. The Eagles led 4-0 at that point.

"I know my defense is really good," Hunter said. "We struggled in the beginning of the year, had a few errors that cost us some games. But we came together and played as a family. I'm really, really confident in our defense."

The defense and the Eagles' coaching staff are very confident in Hunter. And he proved why once again Saturday night.