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SportsTone.net

ASHEBORO - When things aren't going well for an American Legion baseball player, there are two paths that can be taken. One is to basically accept what is happening, get through the season and work toward the next high school or college campaign.

Then there's the path that Randolph County Post 45's Jackson Hill has taken. The Randleman High School product did not get off to the start he had hoped he would when the Legion season began this summer.

There were easy ground balls, infield popups and a ton of missed opportunities.

So Hill decided enough was enough and he went to work, hard work. An adjustment on his swing, perhaps even a new mental approach and Hill has turned back into one of the team's top hitters and run producers as Post 45 sets to begin the second round of the Area III playoffs on Friday.

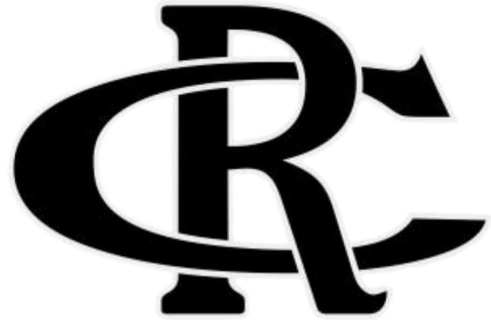
"I thought I was getting out of my swing, trying to do too much," Hill said of the early season struggles. "I wasn't producing. It was the same ground balls and popups. I had to tell myself to stay flat. I think it's made me a different person. Changing myself, bettering myself."

The numbers bare that out. As Randolph County, the Northern Division champions who earned a first-round bye in the playoffs, enters second-round action, Hill will take a .404 batting average (23-for-57) into the series. He has four doubles, a triple, scored 20 times and knocked in 12. He also has four stolen bases for Post 45, which is 16-3 overall.

"I think it was just getting a little bit of confidence," Post 45 coach Andrew Connor said. "I think that's the biggest thing. He was over-thinking and that was a lot of it. He is a really good athlete, a really good baseball player and sometimes your brain gets in the way and throws something off."

Something has changed since the early season and maybe all it took was a little luck. Trailing by one with two on and two outs in the bottom of the seventh inning against High Point on June 15, Hill lofted a fly ball to right field, which was lost in the night sky and ended up being a game-winning two-run double. Since that game, Hill has found himself in numerous big-time situations, and he's come through time and time again.

"I told someone last night he is just flat mashing baseballs," Connor said of Hill. "He's having good at-bats and seeing the ball really well. He doesn't try and do too much. He just goes to work. Since that kid lost the ball in the sky, he has turned it on."





Jackson Hill. Photo by Eric Abernethy/Randolph Hub.

"He's a quieter kid, he doesn't say too much," Connor added. "He just goes out and works hard and plays hard and gives you everything he's got. I could tell there was a little frustration early on only because I am next to him. He just keeps grinding and battling. He is going to fight every time he goes to the plate."

Hill has been a big part of Post 45's ability to come from behind. Randolph County has fallen behind numerous times this year, including 9-0 to Liberty, 6-1 to Chatham County and 6-0 to Davidson County before rallying to post wins in each game. There have been others, the latest being a 3-1 deficit to Moore County that turned into an 8-4 win for Post 45 in the last regular-season game Thursday night. Hill had two hits in that victory.

"We're confident in ourselves and we won't ever give up," Hill said. "No one on this team likes losing and if we get behind early, there's no worry."

Hill bats in the middle of the Post 45 lineup and, with players like Lucas Connor, Jake Riddle, Hudson Deal and Brady Armfield batting ahead of him, he usually steps to the plate with the possibility of providing fireworks for the Post 45 offense.

"It's definitely nice always having someone on base so I can score them," Hill said. "And hearing what that pitcher has with velocity, does it move or is it flat, is it a 12-to-six curve or is it more like a slider. We all communicate."

Hill has also been a very big part of the Randleman High School success over the past three seasons. He grew up in Randleman and remembers attending high school games as a youngster.

Now there are youngsters watching him, hoping to one day be as big a part of his team's success as Hill has been for RHS and Post 45.