

Hawks capture IHSA regional baseball title with 10-0 win over Bunker Hill

by John Hough, Sports Writer
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RAYMOND - School is officially out and that means it's officially summer time.

If you play baseball and are still around in the playoffs then how much fun can summer break get if you're play ball with your buddies, while competing for a championship?

Well the Carrollton Hawks have a good idea what that feels like and they're currently living in the moment.

They defeated the Bunker Hill Minutemen in some style by the score of 10-0 in five innings to collect their second straight regional championship and advance to the Carlinville Sectionals.

The Hawks are now 27-5 on the season and previously beat the Minutemen 3-0 on May 2.

"It's been a lot of fun," **Carrollton head coach Greg Pohlman** said. "It's been a great year so far and the kids are still practicing and working hard. We've had to have a lot of kids step up."

Blake Struble and Jeremy Watson both went 2-for-2 at the plate.

"I'm seeing the ball a lot better because we do a lot of hitting in practice and coach really wants us to be good hitters in postseason play, and we've been working on it a lot lately," Watson said.

Struble had three RBI, including a two-run triple, while Watson had two singles and an RBI.

“I feel great,” Struble said. I’m seeing the ball again and staying within myself and putting it wherever I can.”

Hayden Stringer and Kyle Waters each went 2-for-3.

“Waters today played fantastic and he has all season long,” Pohlman said. He’s one who hustles, he’s all marred up from cuts, but I wouldn’t trade him for anyone else.”

Kolten Bottom pitched a five-inning complete game shutout with seven strikeouts and one walk, while surrendering three hits.

“If I’m going to have a bad time then it’s going to be at the beginning of the game so I knew if I started out good then it would really boost my confidence,” Bottom said.

He got through the first inning by allowing one base runner and Bottom felt confident the rest of the way.

“With him he’s got a quick delivery and once he gets it down he’s on a roll,” Stringer said.

Bottom’s counterpart, Austin Yates, felt good too.

Yates set the Hawks down in order in the bottom of the first and then got through the second with little trouble.

It seemed as if the regional championship was set to be a pitchers dual, but in the bottom of the third the Carrollton bats awakened.

“I knew our offense was going to explode,” Bottom said. “It happens all the time and it was the second time around the order so we all knew what he had.” That’s when we started hitting.”

Jacob Lovel, the only senior starter led off with a single and later advanced to second base on a past ball.

Pohlman has been impressed with the way the senior has carried out his duties as of late.

“I can’t say enough about Lovel and his performance as a senior. He went through the big leadership role,” Pohlman said. “He’s played three different positions because of things that have occurred. That’s what seniors are for and did a good job.”

Alex Bowker proceeded to hit an RBI double into the left field corner to score Lovel and put the Hawks on the board.

After a strike out to give Bunker Hill two outs and a chance for Yates to escape with minimum damage, Carrollton refused.

Bottom laced a double into the gap that made it’s way to the left center field fence to bring home Bowker and Stringer followed suit with the third RBI double in the inning.

Watson stepped up and knocked a single to center field that scored Stringer and then took second base on the throw to home plate.

It was 4-0 Carrollton, but the hitting parade didn’t stop.

“It’s the highest you can get playing baseball,” Struble said. “You can’t get any higher than that and I was feeling great.”

Blake Struble roped a single to right field that scored Watson and Kyle Waters topped off the rally with a bloop single.

That brought Struble home and as the dust settled the Hawks knocked in six runs and chased Yates after having been pretty effective for two and two-thirds innings pitched.

“We had hitting practice last night and we were smacking the ball everywhere and I thought, boy I hope we save some of these for today,” Pohlman said. “They were able to figure him out. These games are fun.”

Most importantly the run support proved to be plenty enough for Bottom to protect on the mound.

“I know my offense always has my back,” Bottom said. “Even if I give up a few runs they come back and score, and I love that.”

Bunker Hill did force Bottom to bare down as they put two men on base with one out the following half inning.

However Bottom struck out the next two batters to retire the side and fanned the first two batters the following inning as well for four consecutive strikeouts.

“Kolten pitched a whale of game,” Pohlman said. “People got to realized that he’s only a sophomore, he and Struble both. We’re riding their shoulders through this thing and they play like seniors. They both want the ball every time we play.”

Carrollton went down in order in the bottom of fourth, but revamped in the fifth inning.

After Stringer and Watson got on base with a single and a walk, Struble unleashed a bases clearing triple to give the Hawks an 8-0 lead.

All of a sudden they were thinking mercy rule.

Next up was Waters and he grounded a short hopper to short and forced the shortstop to hurry his throw.

Waters beat the throw to first and advance as the ball sailed past the first basemen, which also allowed Struble to score to make it 9-0.

After Lovel advanced Waters to third on a fielder’s choice, up stepped freshman Gabe Jones, who was 0-for-2 at the time.

“I was trying to hit the ball hard like I did before just like my last at bat,” Jones said. “The first one I kind of got under it. I was just trying to hit the ball and get it out there.”

Jones slapped a pitch between the first and second basemen that got threw the hole, which drove in Waters and gave the Hawks a walk off win.

“It feels great. I don’t know how to explain it,” Bottom said. “It just feels great.”

“Winning a regional is always a great feeling especially when we’ve won it two years in a row now,” Watson said. “It gets even better.”

Carrollton will face the Okawville Rockets in the sectional semifinals at 4:30 p.m. this Thursday at Blackburn College in Carlinville. The Rockets (16-14-1) were responsible for ending the Hawks season last year at that very stage by the score of 3-2 in eight innings.

“We take it one at a time,” Pohlman said. “These kids that are sophomores went to state in junior high and these kids that are juniors and seniors want to get a taste of going to state.”

“We all have a mutual love for each other,” Jones said. “We all play hard and we all try as hard we can after every single game.”