

# **WINNERS AND STILL CHAMPS: Calhoun's long road to championship well worth the journey**

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**EAST PEORIA** – It wasn't the easiest road that **Hardin-Calhoun** could have taken to a state championship game.

But in the end, the road the Warriors took – one that included 44 innings over three games, including a 17-inning marathon in their Friday semifinal win over Campbell Hill Trico – turned out to be a road that led them to another crown.

Hardin-Calhoun repeated as IHSA Class 1A state champions Saturday afternoon by taking advantage of Princeville errors in the fourth and fifth innings to defeat the Princes 3-0 at East Peoria's EastSide Centre. The Warriors finished the year at 40-2, becoming the first Class 1A team since the IHSA went to a four-class system in 2008 to win 40 games in a season.

The championship capped a successful year for the girls in the Warrior athletic program, including the state Class 1A basketball tournament in late February and a regional championship and sectional semifinal berth in volleyball. The Warrior girls basketball and softball programs have reached the Class 1A finals in both sports the last two years running.

“We had a really hard road to get here,” said **Warrior coach Matt Baalman**, “but it was a fun ride. It’s something the girls will never forget; the entire community is really proud of them and what they’ve accomplished and they’ve made a lot of memories that they will never forget.”

**Grace Baalman** herself capped off a record-setting year with a 16-strikeout performance, ending the year with 589 strikeouts to set a state record for most strikeouts for a season; during Friday's semifinal win over Trico, Baalman set tournament and state single-game strikeout records by fanning 39 Pioneers in Calhoun's 4-0, 17-inning win.

Baalman retired the first 13 Prince batters she faced before Madison Roe singled up the middle to break up the no-hit and perfect-game bid. Jessica Devries followed up with a single to put runners at first and second, but Baalman responded by striking out Harley Holt and Chloe Lane to keep the Warriors ahead. Only Natalie Cokel had the only other hit on the day for Princeville, Baalman striking out five the final seven batters she faced in the game.

Calhoun did get two runners – **Grace Baalman and Emma Baalman** – on base in the first, but Princeville pitcher Paige Lane kept the Warriors at bay with a seven-strikeout performance in the first three innings; Lane wound up with 12 strikeouts on the day. Lane couldn't overcome a pair of errors in the fourth, though, Emma Baalman reaching base on a Brooke Gardner error to lead off the inning, going to second on a Madison Lehr single.

Emma Baalman scored when Devires, trying to get Baalman at third on a **Kassidy Klocke** at-bat, threw the ball into left, allowing Lehr to get to third and Klocke second. One out later, Sophie Lorton singled in Lehr to make it 2-0 in Calhoun's favor.

The next inning, **Abby Baalman** led off with a single and went to second on a Lane wild pitch; Grace Baalman then flew to right but Emma Baalman walked to put runners at first and second. The Warriors attempted a double steal, but Devires' throw to get Abby Baalman at third got away and allowed Abby Baalman to score what proved to be the game's final run. Lane struck out Lehr and Klocke to end the inning, but the damage had been done.

“That’s something we do to put the pressure on the defense,” Baalman said “We’re not a powerhouse type of team; we’re the kind of team that manufactures our runs.”

Baalman struck out the side around Cokel's single and struck out the final two Princeville batters to bring the title back to Calhoun; pinch-hitter Natalie Dominguez struck out to end the game, setting off a celebration among the Warrior players and supporters at EastSide Centre.

“This is one of the most humble teams I’ve ever coached,” Baalman said of the Warriors. “There’s a lot of character on the team; they carry themselves well, and they’ve really worked hard for all the success they’ve had. They’re in the gym and working out all summer.

“The success they’ve had, they’ve inspired a lot of younger girls in the area and gotten them involved in softball and in other sports. A lot of girls have really taken up sports because of the success they’ve had.”

Being able to coach the Warriors for the past four years has been much fun for Baalman, “the past two years especially. We’ve got a really great fan base here and I’m sure the entire county will be there at the softball (grounds where the Warriors play) tonight to celebrate the championship.”

A reception was scheduled for Saturday evening in Hardin to celebrate the Warriors’ dual championship and accomplishments.







