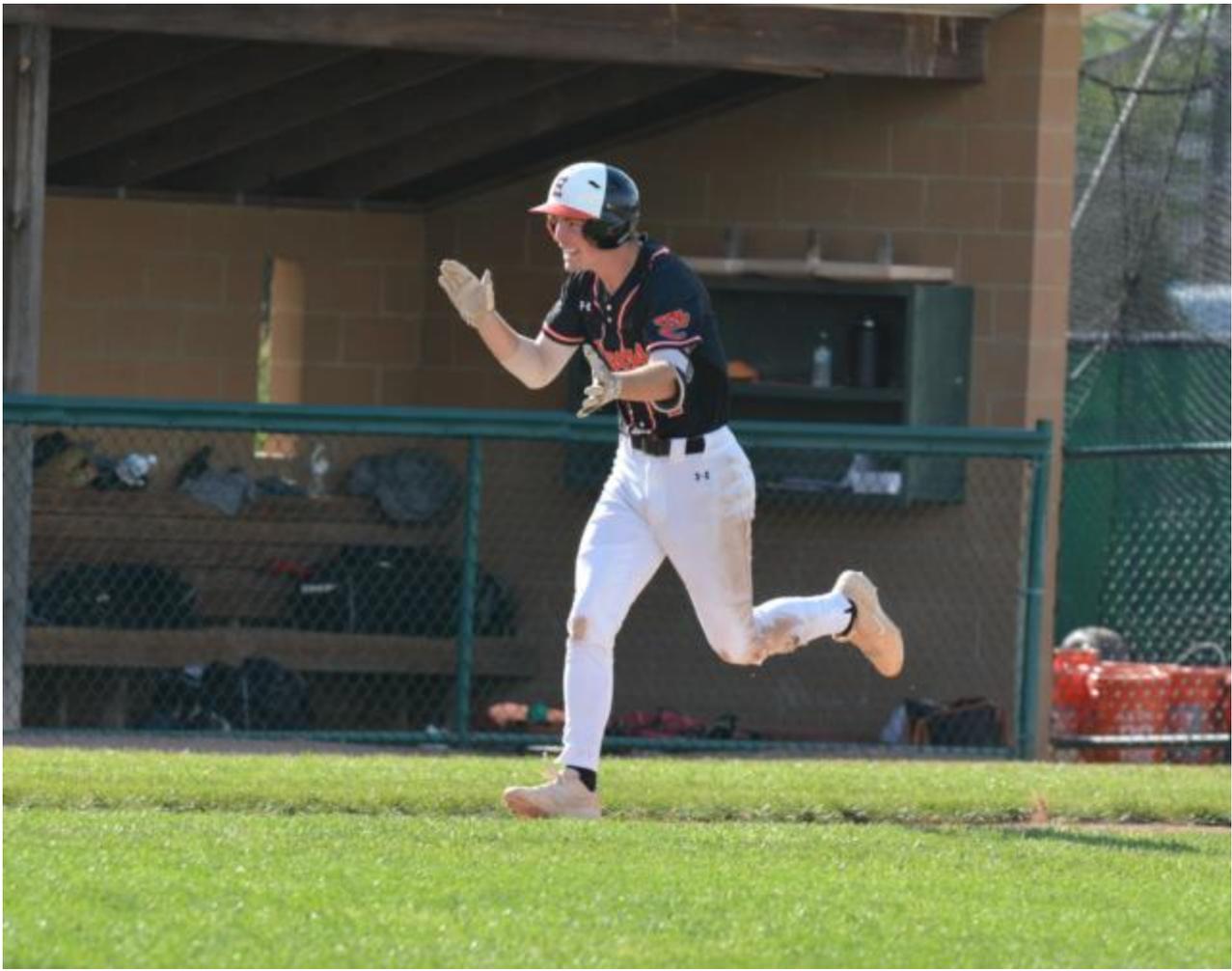


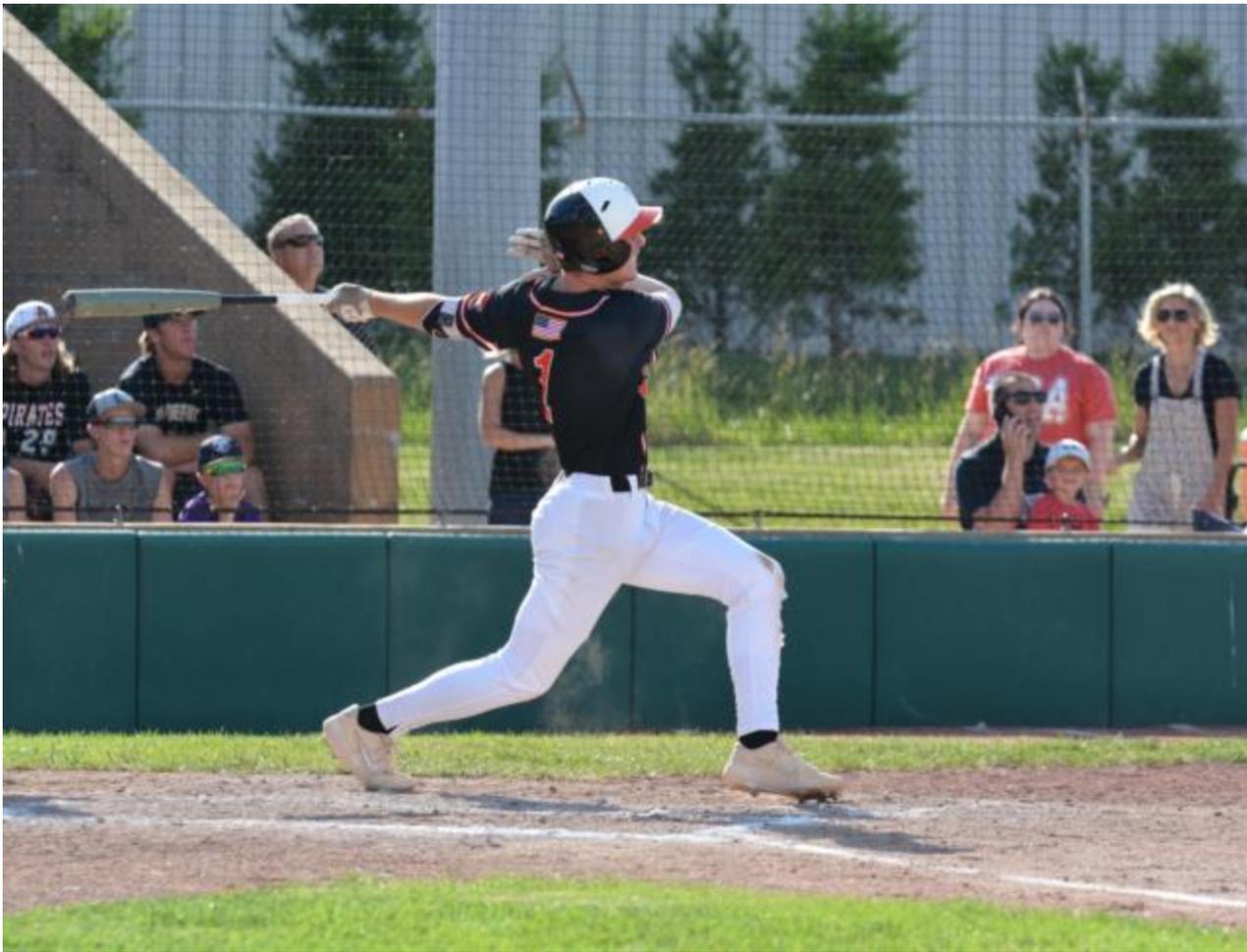
Stearns Pitches Four Shutout Innings in Relief, Tigers Rally From Three Runs Down To Win IHSA Class 4A regional 6-5 Over Belleville West

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE - Spencer Stearns pitched four shutout innings in relief of starter Gannon Burns, allowing one hit and striking out two, while he and Evan Funkhouser hit third-inning homers to tie the game and Grant Huebner scored on a throwing error on a double steal in the fifth to give Edwardsville a 6-5 come-from-behind win over Belleville West in an IHSA Class 4A regional final played Monday afternoon at Tom Pile Field.

The Tigers showed resilience in coming back from a 5-2 deficit in the top of the third inning to win and advance to Wednesday's sectional semifinals, where Edwardsville will play O'Fallon, an 11-0 winner over Granite City in another regional final on Monday.

The winning run came across as a result of a double steal, where the catcher threw the ball into left field for the error that allowed Huebner to score what proved to be the winning run.

"Our guys, we just play the way we want to play," said Edwardsville head coach Tim Funkhouser, "have been playing all year. And we had some moments where we didn't trust ourselves and compete as well, but we did at other times and we did a lot better. And this team continues to fight; Belleville West competed well. I was really impressed,

Todd (Beltz, the Maroons' head coach) always has those guys at the end of the year ready to roll, and we've had some battles. We've won some of those, and they've won some of them as well, so it was a good win for us."

On the winning run, while Huebner scored on the error, Stearns was thrown out at third on the same play, which may have gotten more noticed while Huebner scored.

"There was a lot of, kind of, drama going on within the game," Funkhouser said, "and they made a home run, and us getting a couple, and being able to battle. I thought it was a very good, competitive baseball game, and I thought their pitcher did a good job of keeping us grounded. He made some pitches and got a double play in the first inning, and then got us out of other areas where we had runners on base. We did enough to overcome today."

Another big play was when Ty Berumen threw out Brayden Biggs at the plate on a Maroons' double steal in the third after the catcher's throw sailed into left field trying to get Biggs at third. Berumen threw a strike to the plate to get Biggs at the plate for the inning's first out.

"Yeah, that was a great play," Funkhouser said. "He just did what he does each day, and we do some pressure throws, it's usually off a bat in there, and it's with a runner on second, trying to throw him out. In that case, it was from our catcher, and to have the wherewithal, to be able to just keep making a throw, and not try to do more, that was a big out, and you could tell when it came out of his hand we had a good chance, and (Huebner) made a good tag."

All-in-all, it was an incredible team win for the Tigers to give them their 28th straight win and allow the team to advance to Wednesday's sectional semifinal.

"Our guys have been playing as a team each year," Funkhouser said, "whether it's on the bump, and our pitchers keep going out there and making pitches, and guys making plays in the field. I thought Evan Funkhouser was a great play up the middle today and was able to come up with the two-run homer there to tie. And we've had a lot of guys; Huebner didn't play as well early on, and he, sure enough, came out gunning the guy out, and came up with a couple of hits in the game. And we have a lot of guys that can impact the game in a positive way, and they really showed up."

Burns started the game on the mound for the Tigers, and allowed only one hit in the first two innings. In the bottom of the second, Edwardsville struck first when Berumen walked and stole second, Funkhouser drew a walk and Riley Iffrig delivered an RBI single to left to score Berumen and send Funkhouser to third, where he scored on a Caleb Copeland sacrifice fly to center to make it 2-0 for the Tigers after two.

Biggs opened the West third with a double to the left-field fence, followed by a Jake Stedman walk to put runners on first and second. The Maroons then tried a double steal, with Huebner's throw to third going into left field, but Berumen made a great throw on the money to the plate to get Biggs while Stedman went to third on the play. Walks to Ben Stedman and Koen Groesch lead the bases, where pitcher John Sweeney singled sharply to left-center to score Jake and Ben Stedman, which tied the game at 2-2. Connor Adams then hit a 1-1 pitch over the left-field fence for a three-run homer to put the Maroons ahead 5-2. A fly-out and ground-out ended the inning.

The Tigers fought back in the bottom of the inning, everything happening with two out. Stearns homered over the left-field fence on the first pitch to cut the lead to 5-3, after which Berumen drew a walk and Funkhouser turned on a 0-1 pitch over the left-field fence for a game-tying two-run shot that drew Edwardsville level at 5-5.

Stearns then came in to pitch in the fourth, and in his first two innings, allowing only a fifth-inning walk to Groesch, who was thrown out at second trying to steal. In the bottom of the fifth, Huebner singled to lead off the inning, stole second, and Stearns drew a walk to put runners on first and second. With Berumen up, Huebner and Stearns went on a double steal, and when the catcher threw the ball into left field, Huebner scored, but Stearns was thrown out a third by the left fielder for the first out, but Edwardsville took a 6-5 lead. Two more walks and a stolen base put runners on first and second again, with a fly out ending the inning.

West threatened in the sixth, as Adams left off with a walk and Brandon Pickus reached on an error by the second baseman. Stearns got J.D. Kramer to pop out on an attempted bunt, and Nick Muskopf was called out on an infield fly, but Biggs was awarded first on catcher's interference to load the bases. Jake Stedman flew out to center to end the threat and preserve the lead. Groesch singled with one out in the seventh, but Sweeney hit into a double playback to the box to end the game and give the Tigers their 6-5 win.

The Maroons end their season 16-12, while the Tigers go to 34-3 and host the Panthers in the sectional semifinals on Wednesday, starting at 4:30 p.m., with the winner of Joliet West and Minooka awaiting the winner in the final on Friday at 4:30 p.m. Funkhouser is looking ahead to the game against O'Fallon.

"We'll get a take on what they're doing now," Funkhouser said. "I know they've been playing really well now, and we had some good battles with them early on and fortunate to come up with a couple of wins, but that's been a long time away. And we'll be back there Wednesday for another battle."

It was another big win in the journey known as the postseason, and Funkhouser also knows what it takes to succeed in the postseason, and also had great words for Stearns and his performance on the mound.

"Oh, yeah, it's a grind," Funkhouser said with a laugh. "You just want to last to the end. Spencer Stearns did a great job in relief. He had thrown about five innings for us all year, and today, he threw four innings. We've been kind of stretching him out a little more to get to this point, and he really did what he could do."

As always, Funkhouser is taking things one day at a time and looks ahead to the O'Fallon game and what lies ahead for his team.

"We're just looking forward to celebrating this win," Funkhouser said, "and get ready to go back to work tomorrow and get better for the next game."

[Dan Brannan also contributed to this story.](#)