

Carrollton pulls out game against New Athens

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
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In all the years Carrollton Hawks manager Greg Pohlman has been around coaching baseball he had never seen an ending to a baseball game like what happened in Carrollton on Saturday.

“I’ve been coaching a long time and we were very fortunate,” Pohlman said. Jacob Smith and Jeremy Watson scored on a wild throw to second base to complete Carrollton’s come from behind. It was a 5-4 win over the Athens Warriors in game 1 of a doubleheader in Carrollton on a warm and sunny Saturday afternoon.

The Hawks were down 4-2 in the seventh and last inning. Luke Palan scored on an RBI single by Jacob Smith to start the rally. Hayden Stringer kept things going with another single to send Smith to third base and that is when Watson pinch ran for Stringer. Watson attempted to steal second hoping to draw a throw from the Athens catcher so Smith could steal home.

“We put on a play and never in my life would I have dreamt that they were going to throw the ball all the way down to second and when they did I think it surprised their shortstop and we were able to score on it,” Pohlman said.

The errant throw sailed into shallow right center where no Warriors were in the vicinity. Smith trotted home, while Watson accompanied him moments later as he scampered across third base to home plate by sliding in headfirst.

Athens appealed to third base in a last ditch effort to keep the game alive, hoping that Watson had missed the bag on his way to home plate, but the umpire declined the appeal.

Cole Brannan toed the rubber for the Hawks and pitched six innings, giving up 4 runs (3 earned) and 3 hits, while striking out six batters, walking two, and hitting two. Logan Gardner earned the win after throwing a scoreless seventh inning.

“Cole pitched really well. We had a lot of errors behind him and we’re not making any excuses, but when you don’t play for five days and fight this weather you’re going to play like that,” Pohlman said. “Logan did a good job closing and the kids never gave up.”

Luke Palan (2-3), Jacob Smith (3-4), and Cole Brannan (2-3) all had multi-hit games as the Hawks knocked out 11 hits.

Brannan got out of a jam in the second inning, but Athens reloaded in the third courtesy of a two-run single. Then in the fifth they scored two more runs with two outs on an RBI triple and then on an error. The Hawks responded in the bottom half of the inning on an RBI double by Smith, who would score two batters later on a single from Brannan.

In game 2, Carrollton won again in walk-off style as Gardner, with the bases loaded, ripped a single to right field to drive in Nate Shanks as the Hawks came from behind once again to win 3-2 in eight innings.

“We’re pretty lucky right now; we’re very fortunate to come away with two wins today, but it all goes down into the record book as a win no matter how it happens,” Pohlman said. “We’re winning ugly right now.”

Not only did Gardner win the game for the Hawks, he threw a complete game, going eight innings, allowing two runs and giving up six hits. He struck out three batters and walked one in earning the win.

“I felt good and I tried my best, but there’s room for improvement and I’m going to keep on keeping on,” Gardner said. “It feels great to be out here playing again. I’d play it every day if I could.”

As for his hitting prowess, Gardner came into the game with only one hit this season and a 1.25 batting average, but managed to go two for three with two singles and two RBI’s.

“He had a lifetime career game today and it’s good for Logan,” Pohlman said. “He hadn’t been hitting and today he came through and did some hitting.”

Carrollton fell behind 2-0 after the top of the first inning, but Gardner threw shutout baseball the rest of the way. The Hawks scrapped together a run in the third inning with a two out single by Jacob Smith that scored Palan from second base. In the next inning Gardner got his first RBI as he ripped a single just out of the reach of the Athens’ third basemen.

The Hawks had a chance to win the game in the seventh as the bases were loaded with freshman Blake Struble at the plate, but he grounded into a 4-6-3 double play. But in the next frame Carrollton turned two as well as Gardner caught a sacrifice bunt that was popped up and rifled the ball to Struble at first base to get the Warrior runner.

Carrollton completed the sweep in the bottom of the eighth with a one-out walk by Kolten Bottom followed by a long double by Brannan, who came in to pinch hit. Athens chose to intentionally walk Brendan Settles, which set the stage for Gardner’s walk-off single.

“We played pretty well. We had better defense in that game, but we didn’t get key hits when we needed to,” Pohlman said. “We played a lot of kids today. I think everybody got in the ballgame one time or the other today.”

The middle of the lineup was dominated by under classmen and most of them got on base in each game and made plays in the field.

“It’s fun to watch those kids because I coached them all in junior high and they played really well,” Pohlman said. “They’re just going through some growing pains right now, but certain kids came up today. Jeremy Watson got a big hit and scored that run. Kolten Bottom, a freshman, who I put in at third again today, was errorless and hit the heck out of the ball every time he was up.”

The wins improve the Hawks record to 7-2-1 (3-0 in WIVC play).

“We beat a really good team today. They only had one loss coming in here today,” Pohlman said.

On tap for Carrollton this week is an away game against the Cahokia Comanches on Tuesday (4:30 p.m.) and a make up game against West Central at home on Friday (4:30 p.m.). Then the Hawks will travel to face the Riverton Hawks for another double-header at 11 a.m. on Saturday.

“We need to play all of those games to get ourselves physically and mentally ready to play conference ball because it’s going to be a battle,” Pohlman said.