

Carrollton bows in eight innings to Okawville in sectional baseball semifinal

by John Hough, Sports Writer
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All good things must come to end. As soon as Cole Brannan struck out swinging to end the season for the Carrollton Hawks, Luke Palan, arguably Carrollton High School's greatest ever athlete, put his hands on his knees and looked down into the dirt at second base. His time as a Carrollton Hawk was over.

"There's nothing better than playing for Carrollton," Palan said.

The Hawks (19-9-1) lost to the Okawville Rockets (14-17) 3-2 in 8 innings in the IHSA Class 1A Carlinville Sectional semifinal at Blackburn College on a sunny Wednesday afternoon.

“We played about as well as we could, but we came up short,” Palan said.

Carrollton head coach Greg Pohlman agreed.

“I couldn’t ask the kids to play any better,” Pohlman said. “It doesn’t matter if you lose in the first round of the regional or in the first round of the sectional it’s a tough loss. Our kids played hard.”

Palan and Smith both went 2 for 4 with 2 singles. Palan scored a run. Jerrett Smith went 1 for 2 with an RBI double and a run scored.

“I felt my first two at bats were horrible,” Palan said. “I didn’t know what was going on, I couldn’t see the pitching, and couldn’t pick it up, but then I got into a groove.”

Cole Brannan possibly pitched the game of his life. He recorded 12 strikeouts, walked 5 hitters, and allowed 9 hits. He gave up 3 runs (2 unearned) and pitched a complete game on three days' rest after going the distance against Calhoun on Saturday.

“Cole pitched a great game,” Pohlman said. “His fastball never changed and his breaking stuff worked.”

Coming off of a shocking victory over Calhoun, the Hawks clearly played to their potential, but ran into an equally upstart Rocket team. Okawville defeated No. 1 seed Valmeyer in their regional and were far and way better than a No. 3 seed 13-17 team coming into the game.

“They were solid all across the board and it's tough to beat a team that is playing that well,” Smith said.

The Rockets struck first in the top of the first inning off of a base hit to right field. Coming from first base, Brad Fuhrhop slid into third base to beat out the throw from Jeremy Watson in right field, but the throw evaded third baseman Kolten Bottom as it skidded to the Okawville dugout. Fuhrhop trotted home to put the Rockets ahead.

A 1-0 lead seemed safe enough for Brendan Killion of Okawville, who sported a decent fastball, but had a devastating off speed pitch. He used that combination to strikeout 11 Hawks and walked no one.

Tyler Barnett got the first base hit for the Hawks when he laced a ground ball up the middle. Jerrett Smith then drove him in with a long fly ball to right field that bounced off the wall for a double to knot the score up at 1 apiece.

Okawville got out in front again when Noland Crane took Brannan's first pitch of the 5th inning and sent it over the left field wall for a solo home run. Undeterred, the Hawks once again rallied.

In the bottom of the 6th inning Palan smacked a single to left field, Jacob Smith followed up with a single into center field to put two men on with nobody out for Brannan. The Hawks sensed something was coming for them. It came alright by Okawville's own undoing.

After Fuhrhop caught a Killion pitch called for a ball, he spun up and threw a pitch out to the Rockets shortstop to try and pick off Palan. But the ball took a bad hop off the glove of the shortstop and bounced into shallow left field where no one was in the vicinity. Palan took off for third base, rounded the bag and scored standing up as the game was now bizarrely tied up at 2-2.

Now with Smith on second base with no outs, the Hawks had all of the momentum and Okawville were reeling. But Killion bared down and retired the next three Carrollton batters.

Both sides failed to score in the 7th to force extra innings. In the top of the 8th Okawville had runners on the corners with 2 outs and Shane Ganz up at the plate. The count was 3-2 as he fouled off three more pitches to only intensify the moment. He finally turfed a high, arching groundball that barely evaded Brannan at the pitchers mound. Jerrett Smith raced over from second base to field the ball, while Ganz was peeling down the first base line. Smith collected the ball, but couldn't transfer it into his glove quickly enough. Ganz slid headfirst into first base without a throw over and the runner on third scored what proved to be the game-winning run.

"That's baseball, you win as a team and lose as a team," Pohlman said. "He served up a ground ball and just didn't make the play and that's just baseball."

Okawville will play Mulberry Grove or Morrisonville on Saturday in the sectional finals at Blackburn College at 1 p.m.

The high school careers are now over for Palan, Jacob Smith, and Logan Gardner, who participated on several record breaking Carrollton Hawk teams for football, basketball, and baseball.

“Through and through we’re going to come out and compete in every single sport. You don’t see other teams like that,” Palan said. “Going to the state championship in football and winning a regional in basketball and baseball - it doesn’t happen often and there’s a reason why. It's because it is so tough to do.”

Jacob Smith described his Carrollton career in three simple words: “It was great.”

“I was part of some of the best teams that Carrollton has ever had. It’s just pretty impressive and I’m happy to be a part of it,” Smith said.

How impressive was it?

For basketball, Palan and Smith were part of the 2012 team that took 2nd place in state. Palan, Smith, and Gardner were members of the 2012, 2013, and 2014 football teams that went a combined 32-5 and a runner-up at state this past season. In baseball they won three regional championships.

“You hate to lose kids like that because they’ve been stars in every sport and I wish them all the greatest opportunities in college and they’ll do well,” Pohlman said.