

Warrior pride: Hoopa wins second straight NCS title

Erik Fraser, The Times-Standard
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HOOPA -- In a thrilling game that gave new meaning to the term "pitcher's duel," the Hoopa Warriors claimed their second straight North Coast Section Class B softball championship with a 4-3 win over the visiting Ferndale Wildcats on Saturday.

While Hoopa's Chenone Blake and Ferndale's Mishka Bessingpas-Hamor spent the first six innings adhering to the term's standard definition, the real duel came in the seventh.

With Hoopa leading 3-1, thanks in part to an inside-the-park home run by Blake, Bessingpas-Hamor hit an RBI-single, then came around to score the tying run to keep the Wildcats' hopes alive.

Then in the bottom of the inning, Blake stepped in to face Bessingpas-Hamor with two on and two outs. And just as Bessingpas-Hamor had in the top of the inning, Blake delivered, driving a shot to left-center that scored Natalie Carpenter and set off a wild celebration among the Warriors and their home fans.

"It felt so good," said Blake after answering Bessingpas-Hamor's run-scoring hit with one of her own. "I'm so happy. I don't know what else to say."

Throughout the tournament, the Little 4 rivals proved to be the cream of the crop in the North Coast Section. The Wildcats and Warriors took nearly identical paths to the title game, each routing their first round opponent, then winning close games in the semifinals. They are about as evenly matched as you can get, and the numbers on Saturday prove it. Each team had six hits and scored two earned runs. Bessingpas-Hamor struck out six and walked two; Blake also walked two and struck out five, including two straight to strand Wildcat baserunners on first and second in the opening frame.

"I knew it would come down to extra innings or the last inning," said Hoopa head coach Ryan Ray. "Usually when we play them that's what it comes down to."

Blake almost didn't get her chance to face Bessingpas-Hamor in the seventh. The Warriors had the bottom of their order up, and it looked as though extra innings were imminent after Ferndale's rally.

But with one out, Pateisha Ferris was hit by a pitch. After the Wildcats recorded the second out on a fielder's choice by Carpenter, Shalissa Jackson walked, moving Carpenter into scoring position and bringing Blake to the plate.

"Chenone's always hard to pitch to because she's a great hitter, she hits everything," said Ferndale head coach Vanessa Porter. "We knew that we didn't want to face her, and it was unfortunate that two of the batters that we should have gotten out got on, and then we had to face her."

Which turned out to be very unfortunate for the Wildcats, who had refused to go away, even after Hoopa scored an insurance run in the sixth.

"(Ferndale's) a good ball club, they aren't going to give up," said Hoopa head coach Ryan Ray. "They played a good game."

At the risk of causing a train wreck of clichés, this title game was a classic that nobody deserved to lose, least of all Bessingpas-Hamor, who was overcome with emotion at game's end after giving everything she had.

"She absolutely did," said Porter. "She always comes out wanting to win more than probably half the players I've ever played with, she's very intense."

But in the other dugout was someone who could match her intensity and will to win: her friend and summer ball teammate, Blake.

"Chenone and Mishka are friends," said Porter. "I think they both know what pitches to throw each other, since they play summer ball and have been together for so long. That definitely fuels their intensity."

Both stars are juniors, which means Bessingpas-Hamor and the Wildcats will get another shot at Blake's Warriors

next year.

For that matter, the Wildcats have nothing to hang their heads about after an outstanding season.

"I'm just really proud of them," said Porter. "I'm glad they came this far. I know right now they're upset, but after it dies down they'll realize that they played a great year.

As for the Warriors, who had just three seniors this year, an NCS three-peat doesn't seem out of the question.

"It's within our reach," Blake said.

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