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Forest advances to finals of 5A-4 baseball tourney

**BY RICHARD BURTON
SPECIAL TO THE STAR-BANNER**

GAINESVILLE - Forest and Gainesville will meet for the Class 5A-District 4 baseball championship on Friday night at 7 p.m. on the campus of GHS, but just barely.

The second-seeded Wildcats survived a bases-loaded, no-out jam in the top of the seventh to beat No. 3 Lake City Columbia 5-4 in the early semifinal, while the top-seeded Hurricanes saw No. 4 Vanguard cut a four-run deficit to one in the top of the seventh before holding on for a 7-6 win in the nightcap.

Forest (17-9) got a three-run homer from Gary Merians and led 4-1 early, but needed a strong effort late from pitcher Blake Spires (8-1) to hold off the Tigers (15-12).

The Wildcats led 5-2 heading into the seventh, but Columbia struck for three consecutive doubles, which cut the margin to two.

After an intentional walk loaded the bases, Spires induced a double play, which brought home the second run of the frame, but he avoided any further damage by retiring the next hitter on a groundout to end the game.

"We let them tighten things up, but Blake did a great job," Forest coach Wayne Yancey said. "He's our number one guy and we knew with him on the mound that we would have a great shot and we got him enough runs to work with."

Spires allowed seven hits and struck out seven to earn his fifth consecutive win.

The win clinches a spot for Forest in next Tuesday's Class 5A-Region 1 quarterfinals.

The Wildcats have won five straight and 10 of their last 12 after an early swoon which saw a 13-3 loss at home to Columbia and a 20-7 defeat at the hands of Gainesville.

"We had a tough stretch early, but the kids have battled back," Yancey said. "They are playing real well and are doing the things that they needed to do."

Tyler Carpenter had three hits to pace Forest, while Merians finished with two.

B.J. Robinson, Justin Grant and J.T. Thomas also had hits for the Wildcats and Darren Lucas added an RBI double in the fifth, after the Tigers had pulled to within 4-2.

The three-run shot by Merians in the second broke a one-all tie.

Forest was 0-2 against Gainesville during the regular season and was outscored 29-8 in those contests.

GAINESVILLE 7, VANGUARD 6. The Knights (20-7) put a scare into the Hurricanes (24-2), the No. 3 team in Class 5A.

Gainesville led 7-3 entering the seventh inning, but couldn't slam the door on the Knights until Stephen McNeill, the fourth pitcher of the frame, retired Matt Bevis on a grounder with two out and two on.

"We came up here with the intent of playing hard for seven innings and we accomplished that tonight," said Vanguard coach Ed McPadden, whose team had lost a pair of meetings to the Hurricanes during the regular season by a combined score of 23-7.

"We as coaches can't ask anything more of these kids. They played as hard as they could."

The Hurricanes broke a 3-all tie with four runs in the fifth off J.R. Rekully (11-1), but saw Vanguard make things interesting late.

Matt Wright led off the seventh with a walk, which ended the night for Florida State signee Luke Smerciak (9-0) on the hill.

After Edwin Bourbon retired the next hitter, **he walked Eric Grabe** and Phillip Wagner to load the bases.

The Hurricanes replaced Bourbon with J.J. VanWinkle, and he walked Joe Jones on four pitches to force in a run.

Karl VonRodenstein then ripped a VanWinkle offering off the short right field fence, **which scored Grabe**, pulling Vanguard to within 7-5.

McNeill, who hadn't recorded a save all season, entered the game and J.B. Berrientos greeted him with a sacrifice fly to pull the Knights to within one, but that was as close as they would get.

"Gainesville's got a lot of weapons and they are an excellent club," McPadden said.

"We battled back and I am real proud of our kids."

Wright, one of eight seniors on Vanguard's roster, stroked the fifth pitch of the game for a solo homer and Berrientos touched Smerciak for another solo shot in the second, but the Hurricanes slowly battled back and tied the game at 2-all in the third.

A RBI single by Brad D'Ambrosio in the third put the Knights back in front 3-2, but Chad Graziano had a sacrifice fly in the fourth to tie things and then led off the fifth with a solo homer to put the Hurricanes ahead for good.

Tyler Holt, an FSU signee, led Gainesville by going 4-for-4 with three stolen bases. For the season, Holt was 9-for-13 with five runs scored and four RBIs against the Knights.

The win for Smerciak was his third against Vanguard this season.

Rekully, who holds the Vanguard record for most wins in a season, went five innings and gave up four earned runs on 11 hits. He walked one and struck out two in throwing 103 pitches.

The loss was just the second for the Knights in their last 14 games and snapped a four-game winning streak.

Gainesville has now won six in a row overall.