

Lady Rams ends regular season with 19-5 Senior Day Win Over Shaw

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

The Winston-Salem State Lady Rams (20-20, 13-3 CIAA) closed out the 2015 regular season in style when they took a dominating 19-5 win over the Shaw Lady Bears (7-25, 6-10 CIAA), Sunday afternoon. The Lady Rams took the win behind a solid overall effort with some great play on both sides of the ball.

As a team, the Lady Rams finished the game with 17 total hits and turned them into 19 runs for the win with only one fielding error. WSSU sophomore Mercedes Hargett had her second stellar batting effort with a two-for-two batting effort with a grand slam home run, a double, two runs scored, and four RBI in the game. Sophomore pitcher Katherine Zimmer added a three-for-four effort with three runs scored. Freshman outfielder Anna Marino was three-for-four with three RBI and three runs scored.

The Lady Rams jumped out early and never looked back as they scored at least five runs scored in three of the

four innings that the team batted in. After allowing a first inning run to the Bears, the Lady Rams took control of the game early when Hargett hit her second grand slam home run of the day to put the team on top, 4-0.

Senior infielder Katrina Bartlett added a score when she took advantage of the Shaw passed ball to leave the Lady Rams on top, 5-1 after the first inning. The Lady Rams returned in the second inning when Bartlett hit a two-RBI double that scored Zimmer and Hargett. A WSSU double steal later in the inning allowed Marino to score as well. Freshman catcher Melissa Carillo drove in Marino on an RBI single later in the inning. Sophomore infielder Jada Johnson returned the favor when she hit an RBI single to score Marino. Senior infielder Monet Daly closed out the scoring in the inning when she hit a sacrifice fly that scored Johnson. In the third inning, the Lady Rams added three runs when sophomore Danyelle Beamon hit an RBI groundout that scored sophomore outfielder Chyna Riley.

Zimmer scored once again on a Shaw passed ball later

in the inning as well. Marino in turn closed the scoring in the inning when she scored on a Shaw fielding error. The Lady Rams closed out their scoring efforts in the fourth inning when Marino hit a three RBI double which was followed by another Marino score on a Shaw wild pitch. Daly showed up once again when she hit an RBI single up the middle to score Carillo. From there, the Lady Rams closed out the win with just four fifth-inning runs allowed to the Bears to end the game.

Zimmer (4-0) took the pitching victory when she went all five innings with six hits allowed, including allowing just one through the first four innings. She allowed just five runs (four earned) and added four strikeouts with two walks.

With the win, the Lady Rams improve to 20-20 overall and 13-3 in Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA) play. The team has completed the regular season and will take part in the 2015 CIAA Softball Championship Tournament later this week.

WSSU

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cred clutch performances for the Lady Rams over the final weeks. Over that 10-game stretch, Riley hit .562 (18-of-32) and had 5 RBIs. Riley also turned in solid stints as a pitcher, winning four games in five appearances.

Mercedes Hargett, the CIAA's top strike-out pitcher (119), put on power hitting display in Winston-Salem State's season-ending doubleheader victory (14-1, 19-5) against Shaw University last Sunday. Hargett, who inflicted considerable damage in her four trips to the plate, blasted two home runs (which included a grand slam) and had nine runs batted in.

Aside from Riley and Hargett, Kat Zimmer (.362 batting average, 26 RBIs) has emerged as an offensive threat. Katrina Bartlett leads the team in hitting (.439) and anchors the infield defense.

"Hopefully, we've arrived at our turning point," said Coach LaTaya Hilliard-Gray. "At this time of year, we don't have a record. The conference tournament is about to begin and we're 0-0. The opportunity is there for us play up to our potential."

Such was the case in the Lady Rams' lone loss during the late-season win streak. In a 7-2 defeat to St. Augustine's on April 24, a slew of fielding errors and base-running mistakes set the tone for Winston-Salem State's downfall. Gray is keenly aware that her team must avoid mental lapses in order advance in postseason play.

"The key for us is to play with a high level of consistency at the plate and in the field. During the season, there have been instances where we've have one bad inning and that bad inning changes the entire complexion of the game. But I'm encouraged by how well we've played lately," Gray said.



WSSU's Katrina Bartlett (6) awaits the umpire's call after tagging Jasmine Rios of St. Augustine's during CIAA softball action last Friday.

Photo by Craig T. Greenlee

Williams

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time (in North Carolina) and I was named MVP. Looking back on my whole high school career, that's something I'll always remember. It was just amazing."

Over the past three seasons, Williams has bloomed as one of the most versatile high school track athletes in the state. During that span, she's placed among the top eight in both hurdle events at state meets (indoors and outdoors). Williams is equally formidable as a key cog in the sprint relays. Since her sophomore year, Parkland has reigned as a two-time national champion in the 4x200 (indoors and outdoors) and three-time state champ in the 4x400.

"Ebony has broken every hurdles record at Parkland and she's played a huge part in helping our relay teams win championships," said Coach Antwan Hughes. "Not only is she a great leader, but she's an outstanding role model, athletically and academically. All the girls, especially the younger ones, look up to her. Ebony has done a remarkable job."

Williams will end her high school career as one of the Triad's most accomplished track athletes in recent history. Even though she's won championships and has a college scholarship to run track at Clemson University, staying hungry and motivated has never been an issue.

"My team keeps me motivated," she said. "We don't run in a lot of meets in Winston-Salem. But when we do compete in local meets like our conference championships, we want to leave no doubt that this (Central Piedmont) is our conference."

In recent years, the dominance of Parkland's girls in track and field is undeniable. Compared to their counterparts, the Mustangs have proven to be head-and-shoulders above the rest of the pack. As a result, expectations are

sky-high, but that doesn't mean that Williams and her teammates take winning for granted.

"People look at us and say that we're so good and we make things look so easy," she said. "But it's what we do in practice that makes all the difference. We train like animals. Coach Hughes runs us so hard and so much, that when it comes to competing in a meet, it's a breeze. That's how we're able to keep running faster and keep setting records."

The curtain is getting ready to close on the high school careers of Williams and five other Parkland seniors who will also run track in college. Nateja Hale (UNC Asheville), Ilamumford (Appalachian State), Erin Morrison (Hampton), Miaysha Bryant (N.C. Central), Katlin Sherman (UNC) and Williams were teammates in summer track before their arrival at Parkland in

2012. "What I'll miss most is the team bond, the chemistry," said Williams. "I've run with the same group of girls since the age of 13. We've all known each other for the longest (time). Since I'm going to a different state for college, I won't get to see everybody. I'll see some of them, but they'll be running for another school. So, it's not like we'll be able to catch-up with each other like we did when all of us were in Winston-Salem."



Ebony Williams (middle) is the Class 4-A state indoor record holder in the 55-meter hurdles.

Photo by Craig T. Greenlee

Cooper

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admits that his forehand needs work. In assessing his overall game, Cooper isn't satisfied with his serve, which he described as "very good at times and not so good at other times."

In a one-on-one interview, Cooper talked to Sports Week about his return to tennis.

SW: What's your comeback season been like?

Cooper: Overall, it's been good. I've had my rusty spots and have gone through some rough patches. But it hasn't been too much of a handicap for me. I knew I wasn't going to be like I was when I was 13, when I was hitting all the time. Back then, I was a pretty solid player.

SW: What did you most want to accomplish this spring?

Cooper: I was hoping to take people by surprise. I wanted people to wonder about who I am and where I came from. That's pretty much the reaction I got from everyone, so things turned out just like I hoped it would. Not too many people at Reynolds knew that I played tennis. When I showed up for try-outs, people thought I was joking. After I hit a few balls, they saw that I was serious.

SW: What caused you to want to play competitive tennis again?

Cooper: When I got that invitation to coach at Young Folks last summer, it got me to thinking about making a comeback. I went out and coached and got that racket in my hand. From that point on, it was pretty much a wrap. That same summer,

I played against a good friend of mine, Wesley Moses, who tried to convince me two years earlier that I should concentrate on playing tennis instead of being a runner.

When I played against Wesley, I found out that I wasn't nearly as bad as I thought I'd be. Since I had taken off for two-and-a-half years, I didn't think I'd be able to play. As things turned out, I still had the ability to hit all the strokes and play the game. All I needed was some tweaking here and there, some oil for the rust.

SW: Why did you quit playing?

Cooper: When it comes to tennis, one of my weaknesses had been my mentality. I get down on myself pretty easily. If I messed up one time, I would yell at myself and I had a bad habit of slapping my leg really hard and it would leave a mark.

The summer before my eighth-grade year, I wasn't hitting the ball very well. I would come to practice with the mindset that I would hit awful. That destroyed me. I came home crying after one practice and decided that I didn't want to have anything to do with tennis any more. For a few months after that I was really relieved that I was no longer playing the game.

SW: Ever think about what it would be like if you hadn't quit?

Cooper: I think about it a lot. The year before I stopped playing, I was ranked 18th in the state for 12-year-olds. So, I do wonder how much farther along I would be at this point because I'm bigger and stronger and definitely smarter.

SW: If you had it to do all over again, would you change anything?

Cooper: I wouldn't have taken those two-and-a-half years off. It's unfortunate that I let a few bad months mess me up in the head. But that happens. I'm not the first

person who has suffered burnout from the sport. Other than that, I did everything the way I should have. I had fun with it and met a lot of people. Playing tennis has been a great experience for me.

SW: Looking back on what happened, do you feel you learned any lessons?

Cooper: I learned that I needed to stop being so hard-headed. There were a lot of people who were very skeptical about me quitting. I didn't want to be wrong, so I just stayed out. If I had just gotten over my pride, and accepted the fact that I was wrong, I believe it would've been very helpful. Now I see it. I'm less hard-headed and more open to things. It helped develop my character.

SW: Are you interested in playing college tennis?

Cooper: No, and that's because college sports requires a lot more commitment. Running high school cross-country

and track consumes a lot of time — a lot more than high school tennis. When it comes to college, I think the level of

commitment (to play tennis) would be far more than it would be for high school.

I just can't see myself wanting to stress over school and tennis when the (academic) workload is going to be enough. Plus, I want leave room for other extracurricular activities in college. There are other things I want to experience. I've had my time to experience competitive sports.

SW: What keeps you motivated to achieve as an athlete and as a person?

Cooper: I'm naturally self-motivated. I get a lot of that from my father (Sam Cooper), who comes from a family of farmers in Hemingway, South Carolina. Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, he and the family have been through a lot and they've seen it all and they've persevered. He's worked very hard for a very long time. One of the things that I really admire about him is that he never lets anything faze him.



Aaron Cooper has rekindled his passion for the game he learned to play at the age of 5.

Photo by Craig T. Greenlee