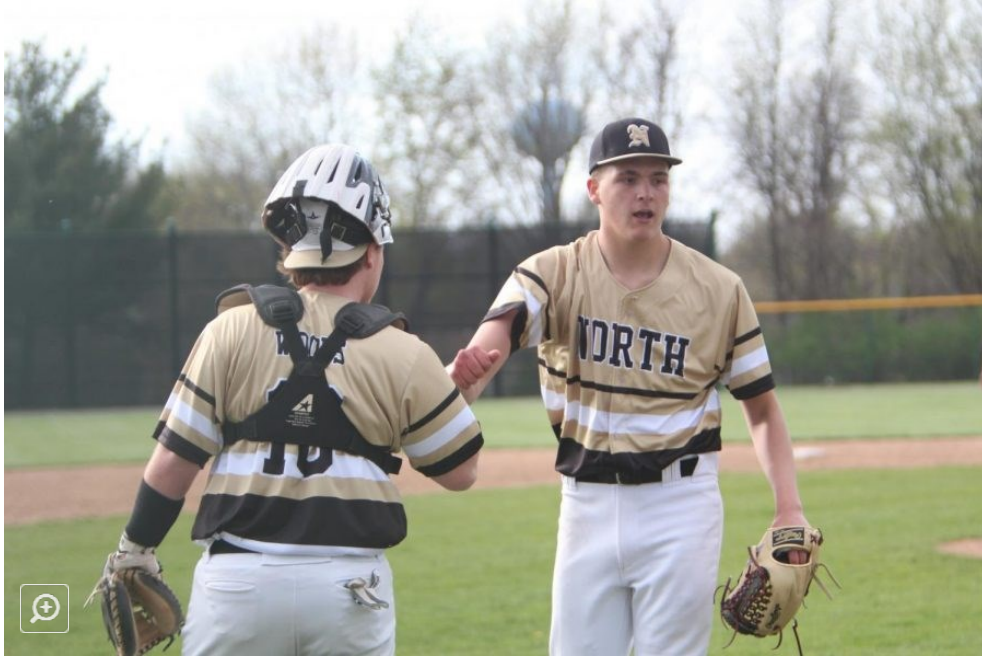


Grace Punches Out 13 to Lead Knights Past Vikings [Story and Photo Gallery]



By Michaela Erfling and Dominic Hoscher

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(photos by Michaela Erlfling)

Francis Howell vs. Francis Howell North. Nearly a full crowd on hand. Scouts watch as senior Sam Grace takes the mound. For a regular season game, the stage couldn't have been much larger for either team that took the field. With all of this in mind, the Knights had a bit of added energy to take down their rival Vikings.

"We want to win every game, but this one we just come in with the heaviest mindset of 'we need to win' because we do, and we love beating Howell," senior second baseman Max Brauch said.

This heavy mindset was needed entering a matchup with a dominant starter on the opposing side in Zack Hunsicker. Hunsicker is a University of Central Florida commit who has an ERA of 2.04 on the season. With Grace and his 1.84 ERA starting for the Knights, an electric pitching battle was on the horizon. In order for either team to come out on top, they knew that they had to get to the opposing starter early and often.

Howell North was able to do just that.

After Grace threw a scoreless frame in the top of the first, the Knights loaded the bases in the bottom of the inning and Max Brauch was able to draw a walk to make it a 1-0 FHN lead. The next two innings were identical on the scoreboard, with the Knights exiting the third inning with a 3-0 advantage. It wasn't until the fourth when the Vikings were finally able to wake up the bats, as they tied the game at three behind a two RBI double by shortstop Clay Allen. Howell North relied on senior Drew Massarand off of the bench in the bottom half of the inning to turn the momentum back in the host's favor.

"I was trying to keep my eye on the ball and take my hands straight to it," Massarand said. "I was just looking to put it anywhere in play and see if I could get that run in."

Massarand, coming in for fellow senior Noah Pingel at designated hitter, was able to come up clutch and drive in the go-ahead run in the fourth inning. In the very next at bat, Brauch was able to collect his second RBI of the night and make it a 5-3 Knights lead. Howell North would continue to add to their tally and score for the fifth consecutive inning, as senior first baseman Matt Dunham drove in two more down the first base line to put the Knights in great shape heading into the final two innings, leading by a score of 7-3.

Into the sixth, Howell North's Grace was up and over 100 pitches on the night and was taken out in favor of Noah Pingel. Despite allowing two Vikings to score in the sixth, Pingel was able to rebound in the seventh and shut Francis Howell down, giving the Knights a much-needed 7-5 win over their rivals.

"We kept our hearts and our mind in the game the whole time," Brauch said. "We had a couple of miscommunications but it didn't knock us all of the way down. We picked each other back up and it was just a good team game."

Grace was the winning pitcher of the star-studded duel on the mound, giving up just three earned runs and striking out 13 Vikings, while Pingel earned his first save of the season. Dunham and Brauch led the team at the plate, tallying two RBI each. The win improved the Knights to a record of 8-10 on the season, and with it coming in a rivalry with as much magnitude as Howell and Howell North's, it was a critical boost to the team's overall mindset heading into the home stretch of the season.

"It's a big win for us," assistant coach Mike Freedline said. "Hopefully it gives the boys some confidence and that's all they need, just to know that they can win and learn how to win, so they can put it together and play as a team so hopefully this will

lead us to more wins down the road.”

They won't have to look much further down the road to find their next game, which will be tomorrow against Francis Howell yet again. A win would put the Knights just one game below .500, and give them their first winning streak since March 30. (story by Dominic Hoscher)



Tags: Baseball, Dominic Hoscher, Drew Massarand, Francis Howell, Francis Howell North, Max Brauch, Michaela Erfling, Mike Freedline, spring sports, Varsity

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