

## Lady Hawks fall into losers' bracket

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*After their loss to Collins Hill in the winners' bracket final, Abby Akins and her Hillgrove teammates will have to win three times today to clinch their first state title.*

*Staff photo by Laura Moon*

COLUMBUS — Hillgrove was held to four hits and stranded 11 runners on base in dropping a 3-1 decision to Collins Hill in the winners' bracket final of the Class AAAAA state championships at the South Commons Softball Complex on Friday.

The Lady Hawks (29-10), who are in the state finals for the first time in program history, fell to the losers' bracket of the double-elimination tournament and will face Mill Creek in an elimination game today at 10 a.m. The winner would then move on to the championship finals and would have to beat two-time defending champion Collins Hill twice to claim the state title.

Mill Creek beat Kennesaw Mountain 4-1 in an earlier losers' bracket game.

"This will be the third time we've played Mill Creek this year," Hillgrove coach Jason Campbell said. "We have to stop their No. 3 hitter from getting balls in the gap and scoring runs for them. We're going to get over this loss real quick, and we're going to go back out there (today) and finish this deal out."

Hillgrove's problems against Collins Hill started early when the Lady Eagles jumped on top 2-0 in the first inning. Brittany Roley, who was 2-for-3 with a stolen base and a run scored, led off with a double, stole third and scored on Payton Wilson's RBI single.

McKenzie Halstead doubled in the next at-bat to plate Wilson from first for the two-run margin.

The Lady Hawks did all they could to get back into the contest, but they stranded runners on first and second in both the first and second innings before finally breaking through with a run in the fourth.

Ashley Allen reached on an error to start the frame and moved to second on Mikaela Scott's sacrifice bunt. Allen came around to score when Brittany Ferrell reached base on an error, leaving Hillgrove trailing 2-1.

The game could have improved for Hillgrove when Qiley Lewis walked and Maisie Steed was hit by a pitch to load the bases, but Collins Hill pitcher Kayla Floor — who gave up one unearned run on four hits, struck out seven and walked two over seven innings — induced a groundout to end the threat in the fourth.

Wilson, who was 1-for-2 with two RBIs and a run scored, plated pinch-runner Mariah Dickey off a sacrifice fly in fifth to give Collins Hill an insurance run and a 3-1 advantage. Dickey substituted in for Ashleigh Simmons, who reached on a one-out walk. Dickey stole second and moved to third on Roley's single before scoring on the sac fly.

Hillgrove didn't go away quietly, however, in the sixth and seventh innings. But the Lady Hawks continued to have problems bringing in runs as they stranded runners on first and third in the sixth, and first and second in the seventh.

Abby Akins was 2-for-4 to lead Hillgrove. Taylor Vennel walked and was hit by a pitch. Ferrell also had a single, as did Lewis.

Abby Evans allowed three earned runs on five hits in six innings. She also struck out three and walked two.

"Our performance, defensively, was fine," Campbell said. "They scored two in the first, but we bounced back and settled down. Abby was pitching well from the start. You just have to tip your hat (to Collins Hill) — They hit the ball when they had to.

"We left 11 runners on base. Offensively, that hurt us. We could not get the one big hit that we needed to tie it, or even to win it. That's the nature of the beast. That's why we're here. That's this tournament. If you don't do those things, you're not going to win.

"Collins Hill is a good team. They have a good pitcher, and we were just one hit short."