

Finals rookie Hillgrove wins twice on first day

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*Hillgrove's Meredith Heyer swings at a pitch in Thursday's opening game against Mill Creek.
Staff photo by Laura Moon*

COLUMBUS — For a team making its first appearance at the state finals, Hillgrove isn't doing too badly.

The Lady Hawks got a game-tying three-run home run from Michaela Morris in the bottom of the seventh and went on to beat Mill Creek 5-4 in eight innings in their first game, then recorded a 10-2 six-inning victory over Region 4AAAAA counterpart North Cobb in Thursday's second round at the South Commons Softball Complex.

Hillgrove (29-9), just two wins away from its first state championship, advanced to face two-time defending state champion Collins Hill tonight at 7 p.m.

Hillgrove broke open a 2-all tie with North Cobb (27-12-1), who beat Milton 2-1 in the first round, by scoring three runs in the fourth, one in the fifth and four in the sixth to invoke the mercy-run rule.

Maisie Steed, who was 1-for-2 with a walk and was hit by a pitch, stole six bases and scored three times for the Lady Hawks. Taylor Vennel also scored and had a single, while Ashley Allen was 1-for-2 with two walks, two stolen bases, and scored twice. Kia Long, who pinch-ran for Allen in the fourth, also scored, as did Brittany Ferrell and Qiley Lewis. Meredith Heyer was 2-for-4 with a run scored.

Hillgrove scored its first five runs with no hits as North Cobb pitcher Kelly Barnhill allowed five walks, two wild pitches and hit two batters over 3 1/3 innings, while the Lady Warriors' defense committed three errors. Allie Coronado pitched the remaining portion of the game and gave up five earned on six hits as the North Cobb defense committed two more errors.

“We had an advantage that we’ve played North Cobb twice (already this year),” Hillgrove coach Jason Campbell said. “With Barnhill pitching, she throws it so hard that you have to be patient. When you do get runners on base, we try to take a few bases by stealing them, and then we’re putting pressure on their defense.

“We started bunting and putting the ball in play and runners in motion, and things happened for us. That’s how you beat good pitchers like Barnhill. You’re not going to get solid hits on her. You have to put the ball in play by bunting or be patient with her and that’s what we did.”

Steed walked to open the bottom of first, stole second and came home following back-to-back wild pitches to put the Lady Hawks on top 1-0.

North Cobb responded with two runs in the third to take a one-run lead as Bryanna Vazquez drew a leadoff walk.

Casey Page reached first on a throwing error, which allowed Vazquez to move to third. Page then stole second and went to third another error that allowed Vazquez to plate the Lady Warriors’ first run, and Rachel Bartoe’s RBI groundout in the next at-bat scored Page for the 2-1 North Cobb advantage.

Steed tied the contest at 2-all after reaching first on an error to lead off the third. She then stole second and third before scoring on Heyer’s RBI groundout to first.

Hillgrove plated three runs in the fourth off no hits. Two errors, two walks, a hit batsman and two steals contributed to the scoring. Lewis hit into a fielder’s choice RBI in the fifth to score Allen as Hillgrove staked a 6-2 lead.

Two North Cobb errors combined with three Hillgrove hits, a passed ball and two stolen bases and led to the four-run sixth, which put the game out of reach for the Lady Warriors, who will face either Kennesaw Mountain or East Coweta in the losers’ today at 3 p.m.

Abby Evans allowed two unearned runs on two hits and struck out seven to earn the win for Hillgrove.

“Coming in, I wanted this team to come down here and play,” Campbell said. “We’ve done that (Thursday). We’ve made a couple of mistakes, but overall we’ve played well. We’ve put ourselves in position to play a game to get into the state championship game. That’s all you can ask for. It’s an honor to be here playing against good, well-coached teams.”

Hillgrove 5, Mill Creek 4 (8 inn.): Michaela Morris hit a 3-run home run in the top of the seventh to the game at 4-all and Abby Akins’ RBI groundout scored Taylor Vennel with what proved to be the winning in Thursday’s opener.

Hillgrove trailed 2-0 after three innings before Ashley Allen doubled home Meredith Heyer to trim the deficit to 2-1 in the fourth.

Mill Creek extended its advantage to 4-1 with two runs in the sixth before Hillgrove’s comeback in the seventh. Brittany Ferrell reached on a fielder’s choice and Qiley Lewis was hit by a pitch before Morris’ three-run home run tied the game.

Vennel was placed on second in the eighth, following the international tie-breaker rule. Heyer’s sacrifice bunt then moved Vennel over and she scored on Akins’ groundout.

Hillgrove played the bottom of the eighth perfectly, catching Anyssa Robles on a steal attempt at third before forcing consecutive outs.

North Cobb 2, Milton 1: Ericka Clifford scored on a two-out, bases-loaded walk drawn by Rachel Bartoe in the fourth to put the Lady Warriors in front during their first-round game.

North Cobb trailed 1-0 after the first inning, but tied the game in the second when Clifford scored on Bryanna Vazquez’s two-out RBI single.

Kelly Barnhill forced two outs in the bottom of the sixth, but ended up loading the bases before getting out of the jam as the Lady Warriors held on for the win.