

Lady Hawks clinch title by narrowest of margins

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*A freshman when Hillgrove won its first region title in 2008, Meredith Heyer will end her high school career with another.
Staff photo by Jon-Michael Sullivan*

KENNESAW — After splitting two narrow games to force a decisive third game in the Region 4AAAAA championship, Hillgrove and Harrison provided some more drama Thursday.

It was second-seeded Hillgrove which prevailed at Clackum Field, coming from behind to defeat top-seeded Harrison 5-4 and dash the home team's hopes for a region title.

Trailing 4-2, Hillgrove (23-9) bounced back with two runs in the sixth inning and a run in the seventh. Meredith Heyer scored the winning run with one out in the bottom of the seventh, giving the Lady Hawks their second region championship in four years.

Hillgrove, which won the Region 7AAAA title in 2008, will be the top seed from 4AAAAA when the state playoffs begin Wednesday. The Lady Hawks will host Islands — a second-year varsity program from Savannah and the No. 4 seed of Region 3AAAAA.

Harrison (23-4), as the No. 2 seed, will host third-seeded Bradwell Institute.

Thursday's game was also the series' third straight one-run decision. Hillgrove won Wednesday's first game 2-1, while Harrison took the nightcap, 10-9 in eight innings.

"I can't say enough about both teams," Hillgrove coach Jason Campbell said. "(Harrison is) a quality team and well-coached. We came in as underdogs. No one gave us a chance but us. I can't say enough. I'm proud of our girls."

Fielding miscues proved to be a factor for Harrison as it committed four errors. The Lady Hoyas also left 14 runners on base.

"Hillgrove is a tough opponent," Harrison coach Olivia Peterson said. "We had our opportunities and didn't capitalize. We had four errors, and that hurt us. We left 14 runners on base, so we didn't have our timely hits when we needed them and that hurt us."

Abby Evans pitched a complete-game for Hillgrove, as did Harrison's Kayla Caruso.

Harrison had a chance to extend its 4-2 lead in the top of the sixth inning as Courtney Sutter, Caruso and Amy Koenig each singled to load the bases with one out.

But courtesy runner Kelly Carroll was thrown out at the plate on a fielder's choice, and Dresden Maddox grounded out to end the Lady Hoyas' threat.

Mikaela Scott reached after being hit by a pitch to open the bottom of the sixth inning for Hillgrove, and Qiley Lewis followed up with a single to put runners on first and second. Maisie Steed then singled up the middle to score both runners and tie the game at 4-all.

Heyer led off the bottom of the seventh for Hillgrove with a walk and then advanced to second on a wild pitch. She eventually scored when a throw to first on a grounder by Ashley Allen went astray, giving the Lady Hawks the win and the region title.

"I knew if Meredith got on base to lead off the inning, we would score," Campbell said. "We scored on a play you wouldn't want to see to end the ballgame."

Harrison took an early 1-0 lead on a solo home run by Sierra Maddox in the top of the first inning, but Hillgrove tied it up in the bottom of the second when Lewis got on first on an error and drove in Scott.

Harrison took a 2-1 lead in the third when Sierra Maddox scored on a groundout by Koenig, and the Lady Hoyas added two more runs in the fourth when Sutter drove in courtesy runner Jen Wood — who was running for catcher Amber Broome — after getting on first on an error. Caruso singled to score Kaci Giles.

The Lady Hawks scored in the fifth when Kia Lang came home on Abby Akins' flyout to cut Harrison's lead to 4-2.