

Lady Hawks' hopes for first title halted

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For Maddie Garner, left, and her Hillgrove teammates, their stay in Columbus began and ended with Mill Creek as the Lady Hawks fell in Saturday's losers' bracket final.

Staff photo by Laura Moon

COLUMBUS — Hillgrove's run for the Class AAAAA state championship ended in Saturday's losers' bracket final as it lost a 9-8 decision to Mill Creek in eight innings at the South Commons Softball Complex.

Hillgrove (29-11) rallied from a 6-1 deficit in the fourth inning, and then 8-7 in the seventh, to force the extra frame. Using the international tiebreaker rule, courtesy runner Sarah Perry scored the go-ahead run for Mill Creek (32-12-1) in the top of the eighth on a dropped pop fly near the pitching circle.

Hillgrove had a chance to tie or take the lead in the bottom half of the frame.

Maddie Garner was placed on second and then advanced to third when Taylor Vennel reached second on an error. Meredith Heyer then walked to load the bases, but Mill Creek pitcher Nikki Sagermann, who allowed one unearned run on one hit and struck out one in 2 1/3 innings of relief, got Hillgrove to ground into a double play to end game.

"The way it ended, we're all hurting," Hillgrove coach Jason Campbell said. "You don't get this far and lose when you're that close and it doesn't hurt.

"The girls played well. We just came up a little bit short (Saturday). We had a good run at this. I'm proud of my girls. I'm proud of our community. They came down here to support us, and that's all you can ask for."

Maisie Steed batted 3-for-5 with two home runs, two RBIs and scored three times to lead Hillgrove. Mikaela Scott was 3-for-4 and Michaela Morris added a home run and three RBIs. Vennel, Brittany Ferrell and Qiley Lewis each had an RBI.

The emotional game, which featured six home runs — three for each team — began when Heyer led off the first inning with a homer for a 1-0 Hillgrove margin.

Mill Creek's Chandler Griffin then hit a two-out, three-run home run in the third that scored Sagermann and Alyssa Stringer. Anyssa Robles followed with a solo blast for a 4-1 Mill Creek advantage.

Mill Creek added to its margin in the fourth. Breanna Buckley reached on an error and scored on Stringer's RBI double. Following Lauren Bennett's single, Stringer stole home to put Mill Creek up 6-1.

Hillgrove started its comeback in the fifth after Steed hit a two-out double and scored on Vennel's single.

Ashley Allen walked in the sixth and later scored on Ferrell's fielder's choice. After a single from Lewis, Morris blasted a pinch-hit, three-run homer that scored Ferrell and Lewis to tie the game at 6-all.

Morris' homer was reminiscent of her game-tying shot in the bottom of the seventh of Hillgrove's 5-4 extra-inning victory over Mill Creek in Thursday's opening round.

Steed blasted her second homer of the game — a two-out solo shot — to give Hillgrove a 7-6 lead entering the seventh.

"I thought I was going to pass out when Michaela hit the home run and Maisie backed it up with another home run," Campbell said. "I think I got a little bit excited, and my head started spinning a little bit. I can only imagine what the girls felt like."

But Griffin, who batted 4-for-4 with five RBIs and scored twice, connected on her second homer of the contest — a two-run blast that also scored courtesy runner Taylor Rogers — to give Mill Creek its 8-7 advantage.

Hillgrove's final rally came with two outs in the seventh.

Allen reached on an error, moved to second on Scott's single and went to third when Ferrell reached on an error. Sagermann then hit Lewis with the bases loaded to force in Allen and tie the contest at 8-all. But a pop fly prevented Hillgrove from bringing in the winner run, sending the game into the eighth inning.

Abby Evans allowed seven runs — five earned — on six hits and struck out five in 4 1/3 innings for Hillgrove. Rachel Jarvis gave up two earned runs on four hits and struck out one in 3 2/3 innings of relief.

Mill Creek starter Tori Mitchell allowed seven runs — two earned — on nine hits.

With its win over Hillgrove, Mill Creek advanced to the championship game, where it needed to win twice for the state title, but it lost its first game to county rival Collins Hill.

Region 4AAAAA champion Hillgrove, which went 2-2 in Columbus, clinched a third-place finish in its first appearance at the state finals.

"These girls have a lot of pride in what they're doing, and pride in this program and the school and the community," Campbell said. "They just wanted to come out here and perform and do the best they could. At the end of the day, we came up a little bit short. We're all happy, and we're going to take this experience and learn from it and cherish the moments from down here and move on."