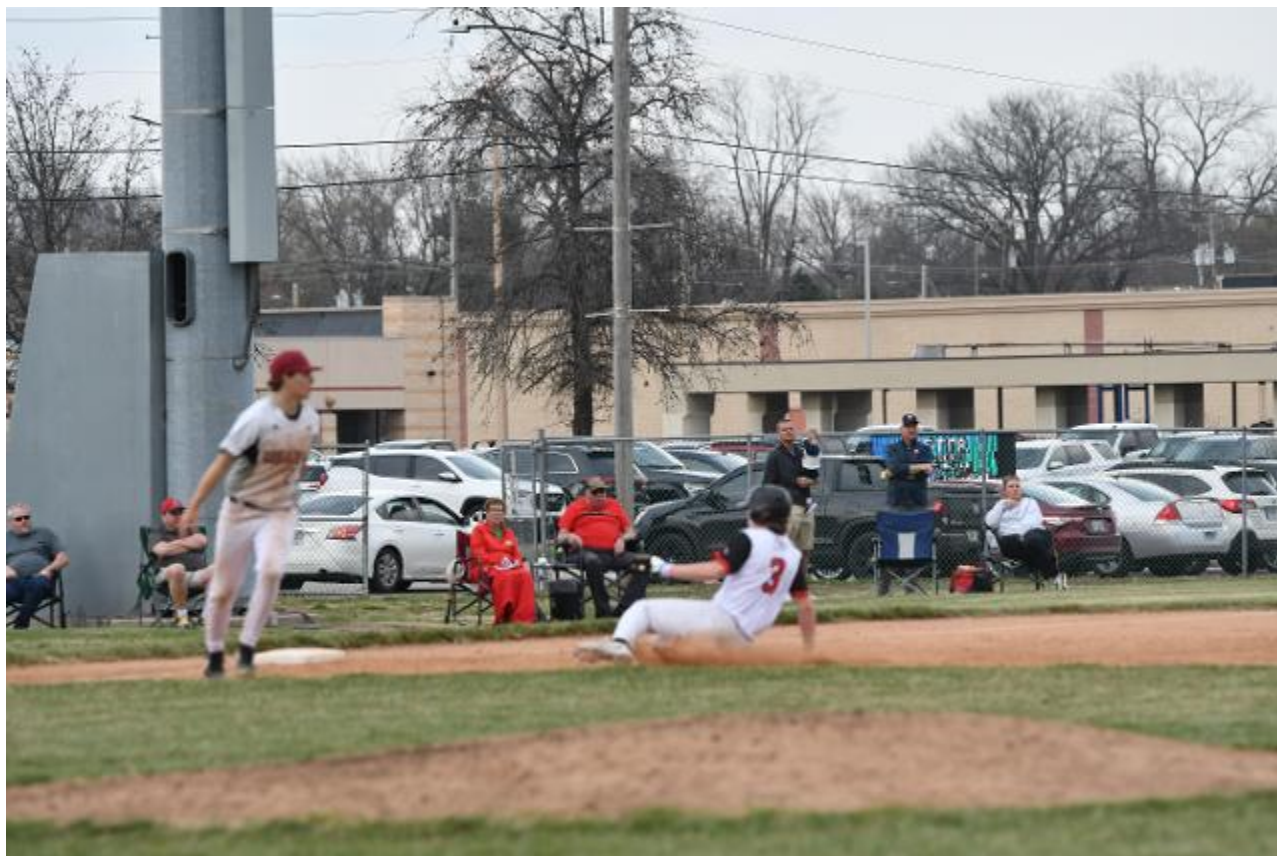


Nathan Hopper Shines as Granite City Triumphs 11-6 Against Waterloo Gibault

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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GRANITE CITY - Nathan Hopper had a big day at the plate, reaching base five times and collecting four hits, while Lucas Haddix drove in four runs, and Dakota Armour struck out five while on the mound as Granite City defeated defending IHSA Class 1A champion Waterloo Gibault Catholic 11-6 in a season-opening baseball game Wednesday afternoon at Babe Champion Field.

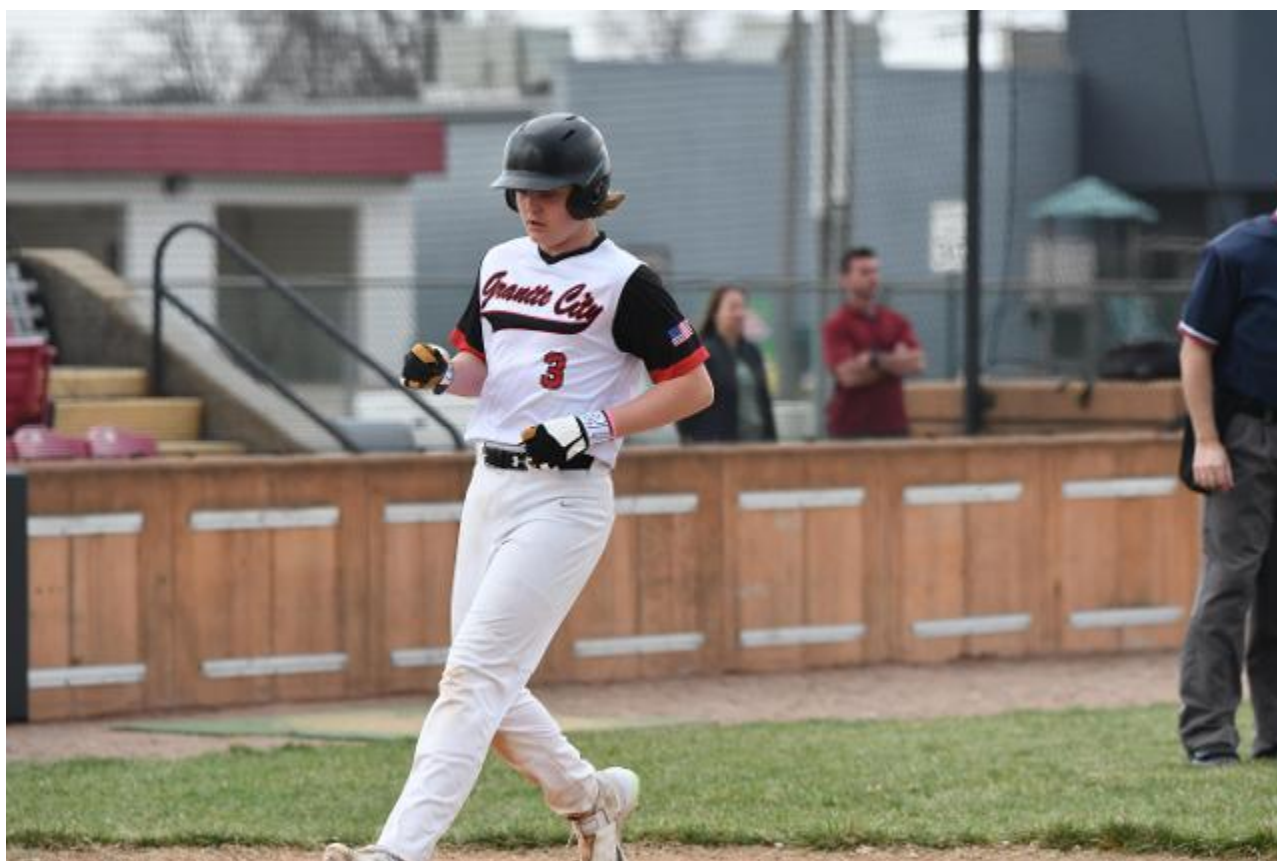
The Warriors scored eight times in the opening three innings, getting four of those runs in the opening inning, and held off a Hawks' rally in the fourth, where Gibault put up five runs, in taking their season opener in an impressive display.

"We're feeling really good," said Granite head coach Scott Smallie. "We knew we were going to have a lot of good pitching going in, but our hitting, we've been working real hard on our hitting, and our hitters came out and cranked that ball from top to bottom. We looked really good at the plate."

The Warriors did indeed. They scored their first eight runs in the first three innings to go up 8-0, then ran into trouble in the Gibault half of the fourth, but fought out of it and went on to the win.

"We put up some crooked numbers in the beginning," Smallie said, "and then, held on for dear life, then our offense bailed us back out towards the end, scored some more

runs, grew the lead, and we were able to hold on for a victory, the first victory of the year."



Always a good thing, of course, to start your season off with a W. Especially against a state champion team such as the Hawks.

"Absolutely," Smallie said. "Beautiful weather, it's been a great spring so far, and to be able and compete against a team like Gibault; they're the defending state champions, and to come out and score 11 runs was beyond their expectations. We did well."

Smallie has some good expectations about the Warriors this season, and everything is both positive and upbeat. especially against the Southwestern Conference teams of the schedule. Granite was a longtime SWC member before withdrawing after the 2020-21 school year.

"Well, we've got a chance to compete with anybody," Smallie said. "We always are looking at that regional, and we're always looking to compete with the Edwardsvilles and the O'Fallons, Alton, Belleville East and West, i mean, the old Southwestern Conference. We're doing the best we can, and we'll come out and keep getting better day-to-day."

Smallie has very good hopes for his ball club in the 2024 campaign.

"We've really got high expectations for this group," Smallie said. "Like I said, we've got a solid pitching staff, we've got about six or seven guys that can throw it. So, if we keep hitting it like this, we're going to compete with a lot of teams in his area."

A very competitive Warrior team would add to the legacy of the Granite baseball program, that has seen many good players and teams over the years, including an IHSA state championship in 1948, and four appearances in the state finals, including a runner-up finish in 1963.

"Absolutely," Smallie said. "Just keep that ball rolling, and get back where it used to be, for sure. It's a good start to the spring. (Girls) soccer won, softball won, it put a little pressure on us today to come out with our first victory," he said with a laugh.

The expectations and hopes are very high around the Warriors, and Smallie feels his team will be up to the challenge.

"Our expectations are just competing with everybody," Smallie said, "and giving it our best every single day."

The Hawks threatened in the first, with Ty Frierdich singling with one out and Jack Keeven drawing a walk/ A fly out and fielder's choice, with Frierdich being thrown out at third, ended the inning. The Warriors then went to work, with Hopper leading off with a base hit, then went to second and third on back-to-back errors, with Hopper and Haddix both scoring on a two-RBI single by Luke Robles to put Granite ahead 2-0. Michael Barnett then reached on an error, putting Robles on third and Barnett on second, where they both scored when Connor Hibbets reached on another error to make it 4-0 for the Warriors after the first inning.

In the second, with one out, Hopper singled, went to second on another error that put Armour on first, both scoring on a double by Haddix to make it 6-0. In the third, Caden Flowers reached on an error, went to third on Hopper's third hit of the day, then scored on an Armour RBI single to make it 7-0. A Haddix sacrifice fly to left scored Hopper to make it 8-0.

The Hawks fought back in the fourth, starting with a Frierdich RBI single that scored Keeven, who led off with a double, then went to third on a Darrin Kunkleman single, scoring on a wild pitch to make it 8-2. RBI singles by J.J. Kinsey, Andy Altes, and Brady Biffar cut the Warrior lead to 8-5 before Ty Friedrich flew out to end the inning.

The Warriors got two of the runs back in the fifth, on an RBI ground out by Haddix, and a sacrifice fly by Robles to make it 10-5, but in the sixth, the Hawks managed to load the bases with one out, with a Frierdich single cutting the lead to 10-6. Granite got its final run in the bottom of the sixth, when Armour was hit by a pitch with the bases loaded, scoring Ryan Hayes with the final run, as relief pitcher Aiden Harris shut down the Hawks to preserve the 11-6 win.

To go along with Hopper's four hits and Haddix's two hits, four RBI days, Robles had a hit and three RBIs, Armour came up with a hit and drove home a pair of runs, and Barnett also had a hit. Armour pitched the first 3.2 innings, allowing five runs on seven hits, walking two and striking out five, while Harris pitched the final 3.1 innings, allowing a run without a hit, fanning three.

The Hawks open their season at 0-1, while the Warriors start off 1-0, and next play at Roxana on Friday afternoon, host Parkway North of west St. Louis County next Monday, and travel to Alton next Wednesday, with all games starting at 4:30 p.m.

