

Titan softballers shock Vikings

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Huntersville, N.C. - The Hopewell softball team ruined North Meck's bid to sweep the MECA 7 Conference schedule with a stunning 3-0 victory at Hopewell High on Thursday.

Titan sophomore Lindsey Russell looked like a veteran pitcher on the mound, striking out seven Vikings for her sixth shutout of the season. The Titans have not lost in nine games since Hopewell coach David Webster made Russell the team's starting pitcher.

"She was unreal tonight," said Webster. "It was a great performance."

Russell is 9-0 this spring, but no victory was bigger than Thursday night's win over the Titans' cross-town rival. Russell made Webster look like a genius in her toughest test of the season. She stranded nine base runners and struck out North Meck power hitter Sara "Boomer" Mooney for the final out of the game with two runners on base.

"I was thinking the worst when I saw Boomer coming to the plate," said Hopewell senior Kristy Giragosian, who was playing in her final regular season game. "I was scared she was going to hit one over the wall and tie the game.

"But we're an extremely different team since Lindsey has been on the mound," said Giragosian. "With her pitching, our team has confidence. She has outdone herself as a young pitcher. She has the biggest heart and won't let herself fail."

But it wasn't like Giragosian put all the responsibility to make plays on Russell's shoulders. Giragosian made the most of her last regular-season game, smashing the game-winning home run in the fourth stanza. The Titan centerfielder jumped all over the first pitch from Mooney, driving a solo shot over the right-centerfield wall.

Giragosian's homer broke up an impressive pitchers' duel between Mooney and Russell, sending a normally mild-mannered Webster – who was coaching third base – screaming down the foul line flashing the victory sign with both hands. Webster's unexpected enthusiasm revealed the intensity of the rivalry game, even after North Meck had clinched the MECA 7 Conference Championship on Tuesday night.

"That's what a North Meck-Hopewell game is all about," said Webster. "Everyone was animated: me, (North Meck) coach Kikta, the umpires, even the players. I could not be more proud of my girls for winning that game."

The Titans (13-6, 9-3 in conf.) broke the game open in an emotional two-run sixth inning. Catcher Kelly Braman and Russell delivered with RBI singles, scoring first baseman Stephanie Spain and Giragosian, respectively.

In that over-heated stanza, both coaches took on umpires in red-faced arguments that could have easily ended with ejections. Kikta questioned Giragosian's stolen base at third, while Webster didn't like a no-call on a play at the plate. He thought Viking catcher Jasmyn Lindsay blocked home – which is a no-no in softball – to save a third run.

The Vikings (14-4, 11-1) surprised many in attendance by sending Mooney to the mound. The sophomore was moved to catcher this season to make room for two standout transfer pitchers Sara Allen and Morgan Hopper. It was just Mooney's third game on the mound this season. She was an all-conference pitcher last year but has played catcher for most of the spring. Kikta had the luxury of experimenting against Hopewell, because the game could not affect the Vikings' conference championship or 4A state playoff seeding.

"We threw her to see what we had going into the playoffs," said Kikta of his pitching choice. "We also wanted to see what our freshman (Lindsay) would do in a competitive game. We out hit them 8-3, but we didn't get those hits in the same inning."

Hopewell ended North Meck's six-game winning streak and extended their run of victories to nine contests.