

Wellsville wins sectional title on wild walk-off in Webster

May 27, 2023

WEBSTER — Matt Burke was clear in his assessment of this wild affair on Saturday afternoon at Webster Thomas High School. “That was the craziest game that I’ve been a part of for Wellsville softball,” the ninth-year Lions coach maintained.

In the last two-plus years, across two sectional championship-winning campaigns, Wellsville has come-from behind, won late and pulled out a couple of dramatic victories on big stages. But Burke’s view on this one wasn’t hyperbole.

This was one of those “you couldn’t write it” type of situations. Down 2-0 in the bottom of the seventh with one out and multiple two-strike counts and facing a standout pitcher, the top-seeded Lions somehow managed to scratch out three runs for a thrilling 3-2 walk-off triumph over No. 2 Bath-Haverling in the Section 5 Class B2 championship.

Bath star Kaili Witherell struck out the last two batters of the fifth inning and fanned the side in the sixth as the Rams extended their lead from 1-0 to 2-0 in the same frame. But pushed to the brink, Wellsville (20-1) found a way.

Marissa Ordway led off the seventh with a base hit before Natalie Adams put a ball in play with two strikes that Bath couldn’t get to, placing runners at first and third with one out. Avereë Palmatier then hit a shot that glanced off the left-fielder’s glove to make it 2-1 and Emma Dunaway, the team’s lone senior, ripped an 0-2 double that tied it and gave the Lions’ second and third.

Looking to squeeze the run in, Wellsville gave the bunt sign to Sawyer Burke, who pulled away on her attempt at the last second, causing the catcher to miss the pitch and the ball to roll to the backstop.

Freshman Ayla Faulkner then broke for home, sliding in safely on a “bang-bang” play at the plate that gave the Lions the resounding walk-off and a third-consecutive Class B crown.

“In that inning, we had some incredibly clutch at-bats from Marissa, Avereë and Emma,” Burke said. “And Marissa has done this before; last year, she led off with a base hit in the fifth (of Wellsville’s 2-1

triumph in the B-2 final, also against Bath) when we were down 1-0, and we scored two runs in that inning. This year, we're down 2-0 and she leads off the seventh with a base hit and we come back and score three.

"To have an inning like that against that pitcher, with our season on the line, it was unreal."

Ordway finished 2-for-3 while Brazen Beckwith was 2-for-3 with a double for the Lions. And though Burke's team mustered just enough offense, this was an electrifying pitchers' duel from the start, pitting two of the top hurlers in the state.

Witherell entered the game having piled up 233 strikeouts in 101 $\frac{1}{3}$ innings, with an .097 batting average against and a microscopic 0.14 ERA. In this one, she racked up 15 strikeouts with no walks in a tough-luck loss. Wellsville star Makenzie Cowburn, who plays travel ball with Witherell, was her typically strong self, fanning nine while surrendering just five hits.

"Kaili was tough, but Makenzie was also awesome," Burke said. "She kept us in it until we broke through in the seventh."

Defense also played a key role as "late in the game, Emma made an amazing defensive play where she fielded a ground ball, dove, twisted her ankle and tagged out the baserunner to prevent them from scoring another run."

Dunaway was named the Class B2 tournament MVP while, prior to the game, Cowburn was again named the Section 5 Class B Player of the Year. And in the end, Wellsville, ranked No. 2 in the state, once more, rose to the occasion on the big stage.

It'll now meet Class B1 Titleist Batavia (16-6) in Tuesday's Section 5 Class B state qualifier. The Lions are in search of their second-straight crossover triumph after defeating Waterloo (Batavia's victim on Saturday) last year, 18-0 in five innings.

Of the resolve his team displayed during its final at-bats, Burke noted, "The motto since 2015 has been 'BELIEVE.' Believe in yourself, believe in your teammates and believe in your coaches. That's what our team did today and the result was amazing."

He added, "Our program puts in a tremendous amount of work and time with the expectation that good things will happen. And that's not a given, but it gives you a chance to have a day like this, and it is so nice to see that all the hard work of our assistants and the young ladies on this team paid off today."

Bath, ranked No. 14 in the state, finished the season 16-3.

THE WAIT IS OVER: Dunbar mashes 2 homers, Cowburn takes control in circle to lead fierce Lady Lions towards ending 23-year absence from States with Class B Far West title over Iroquois

Jun 4 Written By [Chris Brooks](#)



WEBSTER — The year 2000 was the direct turn of the millennium. The first International Space Station crew reported for duty, the controversial Bush v. Gore Presidential Election, movies like Gladiator, Cast Away and Mission: Impossible II were released, and amongst other things, a typical gallon of gas for your automobile was worth \$1.26.

In the wide world of sports, Kevin Dyson was stopped short of the goal line when the Rams defeated the Titans in the Super Bowl at the buzzer, the Yankees won that year's World Series over the Mets, their Subway Series rival, and Tiger Woods had one of the greatest years of his career on the golf course.

A year of prominent significance.

But more locally and close to home, it was the last time that the Wellsville Lady Lions previously experienced being one of four teams remaining in New York State, with high-profile names such as Jen Scutt, Meghan Benedict and Lindsay Loper all leading the charge for legendary head coach Frank Cady during their voyage to the Final Four.

23 years later, they began painting a similar picture. All that remained were the finishing touches.

In their final rendition of Sectional action, the three-time Class B2 champion Lady Lions wanted to make sure it was something of pure beauty. At one point, head coach Matt Burke asked his team to put the hammer down on Section VI champion Iroquois. That request was well-received amongst the group.

Especially by Makenna Dunbar.

If there was any doubt that the Lady Lions weren't going to make this one of their best seasons in recent memory, none remained after Saturday. The Wellsville sophomore helped propel an offense that recorded 15 hits as a collective against the Lady Chiefs, two of them coming on a pair of two-run bombs in the beginning and the middle to help set up that magnificent finish the program has long awaited since that very turn of the millennium, as they became Class B Far West Regional champions in a destructive and dominant 15-5 victory at Webster Schroeder.

"I am so proud of what these young ladies have worked so hard to accomplish. I'm so proud of them. Truly, these young ladies deserve to go to the State Final Four," said Lady Lions coach Matt Burke.

"Words cannot put it into how I feel about this moment right now. Iroquois is well-coached, and they came ready to play today. They go back up to Class A next year, but they are well-coached."

Wellsville's (22-1) day started on the most brilliant of footnotes right in their first outing at the plate. That would come courtesy of the first of two Dunbar home runs, as she pulverized a deep ball to straight away center field, sailing out of the field in an absolute hurry to crack open the ice. Iroquois' response would come along just as fast though, as they bounced right back to tie the game at two off an error by the Wellsville defense, as well as an infield shot that was slowed down by the blustery winds, forcing no play to be made.

But that would be all the scoring the Lady Chiefs could produce, despite several more opportunities to cash in being left stranded by the Lady Lions defense. In turn, Wellsville would go on a scoring

spree and break the game wide open, scoring the next nine runs in a row, including a three-spot in the bottom of the third that was headlined by a two-run single by Natalie Adams with the bases juiced behind the Iroquois defense.

The go-ahead frame was just a sign of even bigger things to come for the Lady Lions, as they used a massive fourth inning outburst to escape away from Iroquois, conducting service with four RBI-producing smacks in five at-bats from Makenna Dunbar, Makenzie Cowburn, Lindsay Stuck and Natalie Adams to keep the fire burning ever so hot.

When it was all said and done, Wellsville would go on to record 15 runs off 15 massive hits to set a tone they wanted to set.

“Our offense is one through nine, they can do a lot of damage,” Burke said. “Today, Makenna hit a couple of home runs. That’s not surprising, because that’s what she does. She drives in runs and makes a big difference. We worked our way out of some first inning jitters, and after that, we had our feet right under us and took it from there.”

While Iroquois continuously attempted to chip away at Wellsville’s lead across the last three innings of play, the damage was done. And then some. Before taking their fifth inning term at the plate, the message sent by Coach Burke to the team in the dugout was received loud and clear. With an 11-2 lead in hand and with Dunbar coming to the plate, the sophomore would help put the exclamation point on the team’s day with her second two-run nuclear blast of the game that snuck its way over the left field fence and out.

The dugout soon broke into complete madness after the homer gave the Lady Lions a 13-3 lead, and all of the room they would need to lock up the historic and monumental victory for the program — the first of its kind in 23 years.

While the bats kept pounding away at the plate, Makenzie Cowburn kept her command in the circle through thick and thin for the Lady Lions, going the complete distance while striking out eight and walking three to give her team the victory.

“When we get deeper in the playoffs, the practices are a little bit shorter but they are more focused,” Burke noted. “Makenzie Cowburn came out on a big stage and showed what she’s all about. She puts so much time and effort into it, and it was apparent tonight in the circle what she can do for our team.”

At the plate, the bats were led by Dunbar, who went 3-for-4 with her pair of homers and five RBI total. Sawyer Burke also recorded three hits, while Cowburn, Lindsay Stuck and Emma Dunaway pitched in with two. Brazen Beckwith recorded a two-run double to finish off the scoring for Wellsville in the bottom of the sixth.

At game's end, the team broke for a mad dash to the bus. Their next destination — Prom.

“They have Prom tonight,” Burke said. “What we talked about was staying focused, and now they're going to Prom. I'm sure they're not even thinking about the State Final Four right now. They just want to go and have fun, and that is awesome. I hope they have a great night, and then we'll figure out what we're going to do for the Final Four afterwards.”

When the team reconvenes after the weekend, it will be in preparation for their first trip to the State Final Four since 2000, as they now prepare to go for it all with a Semifinal matchup against Section IX's Marlboro. That battle will take place on Friday at the Moriches Athletic Complex on Long Island, beginning at approximately 4 p.m.

The winner will advance into the State Finals the next day in a 12 p.m. first pitch against either Section IV's Windsor or Section II's Ithaca Crane.

Iroquois 020 011 1 – 5 6 1

Wellsville 203 622 X – 15 15 2

IRO – Alexa Chiaramonte (LP) (K, 2BB), Ailey Moran (5) (3K, BB) and Brooklyn Bukaczeski.

WLSV – Makenzie Cowburn (WP) (CG, 8K, 3BB) and Brazen Beckwith.

Lions fall just short of championship chance

By J.P. BUTLER Olean Times Herald June 9, 2023

MORICHES — Matt Burke was numb.

The Wellsville softball coach was struggling, he said, to both process what had happened and to find the words to explain it.

Two weeks earlier, his Lions had experienced the sudden joy of a postseason walk off win, scoring on a passed ball in the bottom of the seventh to edge Bath-Haverling, 3-2, for the Section 5 Class B2 title. On Friday afternoon, however, they found themselves on the other side of that feeling.

Wellsville had mostly done what it needed to reach its first state championship game of the Burke era: It took a 1-0 lead on a no-doubt home run from Makenna Dunbar to start the second and built it to 2-0 in the third. Even after Section 9's Marlboro cut it to 2-1 in the fourth, it managed to escape further trouble over the next few frames.

This time, however, that late-inning magic, that last little boost, went to its opponent.

Tied at 2 in the bottom of the seventh, Kalista Birkenstock smacked an infield single and stole second. Lily Sullivan followed by laying down a bunt, which led to an errant throw at first base. And with that, Birkenstock raced home to give the Dukes a gripping 3-2 walk off victory in a New York State Class B semifinal at the Moriches Athletic Complex on Long Island.

"I'm heartbroken for our kids," Burke managed afterward. "We came out ready to play today and things just didn't go our way. I'm so proud of our team and how we represented the community of Wellsville this season."

FOR WELLSVILLE, it was an unexpected and stunning way to close the season. But not because Birkenstock, who finished 2-for-3 with a triple, made something happen on the bases; Marlboro's leadoff hitter, after all, is headed to Division I Manhattan. No, this was due more to how it developed.

Down 2-1 in the sixth, Marlboro's Taylor Castellani hit a bases loaded bunt single to tie it before Makenzie Cowburn fanned the next two batters to keep it 2-2. In the seventh, Wellsville had a golden opportunity to reclaim the lead, with Marissa Ordway ripping a 3-2 pitch for a single and Lindsay Stuck reaching on an error to make for runners at second and third with no outs. Marlboro pitcher Leah Gunsett, however, coaxed a quick line out and pop out and then struck out the next batter looking to miraculously end the threat. The Dukes then needed just two more batters to win it.

And Wellsville, which had been a powerhouse all season long before finishing 22-2, was forced to lament what might have been. "I thought we came to play today," Burke said again. "We battled the whole game. Hats off to Marlboro, they're an excellent team. It's a tough one to swallow."

IN A DUEL between two ultra-talented starting pitchers, Wellsville knew it wasn't going to reach the 12-plus runs it had been averaging in the playoffs. Still, it manufactured enough offense to bring a lead into the sixth.

Dunbar hit her 11th home run of the year. In the third, Natalie Adams had a bunt single and Avereé Palmatier doubled before Sawyer Burke brought Adams in with a sacrifice bunt to make it 2-0. Adams and Palmatier, the team's No. 8 and 9 hitters, both finished 2-for-3.

Cowburn also did her part to keep the Lions ahead until late, stranding a runner at third in both the second and third with an inning-ending strikeout and wiggling out of first and second with two outs in the fifth with another K. She finished with nine strikeouts. Adams added a big defensive play, snaring a line drive at second base for an unassisted double play to keep it 2-1 after the Dukes had scored in the fourth.

But the Lions, typically an offensive juggernaut, also left some runs on the board. In the third, Burke's team made a baserunning error at third base and was tagged out with one away. In the fifth, it had first and third with no outs, but Gunsett recorded three-straight outs, including a pop-out double play, to get out of it. And in the sixth, Gunsett retired both Dunbar and Cowburn, two of the Lions' best hitters, to keep it a one-run game.

IN THE end, Wellsville was just that close — on multiple occasions — to securing its place in the Class B championship game. Ultimately,

however, that ticket was punched by Marlboro (19-2), which will take on Section 2's Ihabod Crane (22-1) in Saturday's 12:30 p.m. title contest.

And though it fell a run short, there was still plenty about which Wellsville could be proud. This was a team that again won 20-plus games, captured a third-straight sectional title, reached the NYS semifinals for the first time since 2000 and entered the contest ranked No. 2 in the state.

"Both pitchers battled ... it's just a tough one," Burke said. "Two good pitchers, two really good teams, and it just came down to ... we were so close. That's what makes this difficult. Our young ladies did everything they needed throughout the course of the year to get to this point. You want it to be a storybook ending, we just came up a little bit short.

"But it was not for lack of energy or lack of effort."

Coach Burke looks at amazing season and Final Four game for Wellsville softball

By JOHN ANDERSON

Sometimes, a run to a state championship just happens.

But most times, your program has to make steps each year to get to that point.

For the Wellsville Lions softball program, that is what is happening. After being synonymous with victories and sectional titles under late coach Frank Cady, the program is back to having that reputation as champions.

Last year, Wellsville softball took the next step to the far west regionals.

This year, they put their hat in the ring to reach the state final four.

On Friday, Wellsville (21-2) was not satisfied after a tough 3-2 loss to Section IX champion Marlboro. The final run crossed in the bottom of the seventh.

But something else happened. A lot of tears. You see this often when seniors realize it's over, their last game. The other players usually show emotion for a minute and pack up, knowing they have more games ahead. The entire Wellsville team was stunned and in tears.

And they only had one senior, Emma Dunaway.

It was a tough pill to swallow as you look back at situations and plays. But the bottom line was, Marlboro had one more hit, one more run and the Lions defense and pitching of Makenzie Cowburn helped strand EIGHT Marlboro runners on base over the course of six innings until the seventh. "Wellsville softball, we compete. And that's what these young ladies did for seven innings today," Wellsville coach Matt Burke said. "My heart goes out to them."

Burke was impressed with the way the young Lions never showed fear on defense, never looked rattled at the plate, whether it was an 0-2 count or two outs.

"Hats off to Marlboro, they are in the state finals for a reason ... they made plays," said Wellsville coach Matt Burke. "I'm proud of our kids. They didn't show any fear of the game today. They came out and they did their best and that's all we ask. It's tough to lose like this ... I'm heartbroken for the kids because their hearts are into softball and I just wanted one more game for them."

Marlboro lost to Ichabod Crane (23-1), 7-0, in the state finals. Wellsville had incredible Section V title game win over Bath, 3-2. The Lions also had incredible statement wins in playoffs. There was a 15-0 semi-final win over Penn Yan, a 15-0 win over Class B1 Batavia in the crossover game and a 15-5 win over Section VI champion Iroquois in the Far West Regionals.

"Everybody on this team really wanted to play one more game and it just didn't happen. We had some opportunities and didn't take advantage of them," Burke continued. "We had them scouted well. We knew what they could do and what they struggled with, we just came up one run short."

Burke brings up his hat off to Marlboro.

But there was another hat.

Michael Cady and the Cady family donated Frank Cady's hat to the team to carry through the post-season run. When Cady was the coach, the team reached the far west regionals and lost. Then the state final four. Cady retired and the program was never on solid ground with six head coaches in a six-year span.

However, during that six-year span, the youth program called the Diamond Dawgs started and was solid. The feeder program won a tournament less than 24 hours after the state semi-final loss.

The game was a tough one.

Marlboro's Ella Leduc and Kalista Birkenstock each had two hits.

Birkenstock, a speedy junior, singled in the seventh, stole second and scored on a bunt for the winning run.

In the first inning Wellsville made a statement when Cowburn struck out two of the first three batters. In the top of the second, Dunbar crushed the solo home run to center that went out so fast the fielders never moved.

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In the top of the third, Natalie Adams led off with a bunt so perfect the pitcher could only field it. Avereé Palmatier then crushed a double.

Marlboro hit a two-out triple in the bottom of the third, but Cowburn struck out the final out and yelled in emphatic style with the statement K. In the bottom of the fourth, Marlboro cut the lead to 2-1 on a sacrifice fly. That's when the play of the game to this point was made. The game could have been broken wide open. However, with one out, a line drive up the middle looked like it would plate the tying run, but Adams made a sprinting catch and never stopped running as she beat the runner back to second for the unassisted double play.

In the bottom of the fifth, a walk and a bunt put a runner on second. Cowburn got a strikeout and then an intentional walk set up a two-out force. Cowburn didn't need it. She struck out the final batter to end the threat and keep the score 2-1 after five.

Sophomore Natalie Adams had two hits and a run while sophomore Avereé Palmatier continued to crush the ball with two hits including a double. Sawyer Burke had the other Wellsville RBI. Junior Marissa Ordway also had a hit for Wellsville.

Burke and the program have made it a season to remember for Dunaway as she graduates. There was the senior night and she was named Section V MVP. But there was room for one more quote.

"Emma Dunaway, our lone senior, she will be missed," he said. "She had an amazing season and career and we would not be where we are without her."

Wellsville 011 000 0 — 2 6 2

Marlboro 000 101 1 — 3 7 1

Makenzie Cowburn and Brazen Beckwith

Lea Gunsett (7K, BB) and Emma Jackson

HR: Makenna Dunbar (W)

PHOTO GALLERY BY TRICIA DAVENPORT:















