

# Forging ahead

## Loss doesn't faze upstart JM

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**NORTH JACKSON** — Hope springs eternal in late March.

By early May, those same hopes better be gushing upwards for softball coaches who have realistic thoughts of making a run in the upcoming districts.

Jackson-Milton coach Kelly Snowden firmly believes the Blue Jays have made that transition as the opening of tournament play is inside of two weeks. She said that despite a 4-3 loss to the Western Reserve Blue Devils on Tuesday in an Inter Tri-County League, Blue Division game.

"I definitely think we'll make some noise in the tournament," Snowden said. "Teams that saw us the first two weeks of the season will tell you that we're two different teams. The whole team is gelling. The infielders are comfortable and our hitters have been hitting."

Among the reasons for

optimism is the presence of junior pitcher Sierra Pierce, who missed much of the season after transferring from the Austintown school district. Pierce, who yielded just two earned runs, has hit four home runs in seven games since becoming eligible. All have occurred during a four-game stretch, including a solo homer in the sixth inning Tuesday.

The homer cut the Blue Devils' lead to the final margin with one out in the inning. The Blue Jays continued the threat when Katie Rago singled following Pierce's homer. Talor Sahli then appeared to have a single when a groundball found a hole between first and second, but she was thrown out at first by right fielder Gabby Baranowski.

Rago advanced to third on the play, but she was stranded when Maggie Garland grounded out to pitcher Maddie Krietzburg.

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The outcome basically came down to one mistake in a near-flawless defensive performance by both teams. A fielding error on a ground ball by Layla Woolf in the sixth put Sydney Miller, who singled with one out, on third and Woolf on first. Pinch runner Bryanna Morris stole second, but Pierce struck out Madi Orock. Baranowski, the ninth hitter in the lineup, then singled sharply through the left side of the infield to score Miller and Morris and break a 2-2 tie.

"Any time we play Western Reserve, it's always back and forth," Snowden said. "It's a rivalry game. We faced them in the district final three or four different times. It's back and forth. They go and we go."

The Blue Devils (10-5) strung together four hits to

produce two runs in the top of the first. Jenny Stubbs doubled with two outs. Krietzburg, Maia Cornell and Miller followed with singles.

The Blue Jays (11-11) answered with two runs in the bottom of the first. Madde Hyland doubled with one out. Pierce singled home Hyland, and Pierce scored on a single by Sahli.

Pierce settled down and didn't allow another earned run after the first inning. She struck out five and didn't yield a walk. Krietzburg struck out six and didn't have a walk.

"You have to figure out where the strike zone is going to fall, and we weren't getting the inside corner at first," Snowden said. "We had to figure out where she (Pierce) was going to go with those pitches. Once we figured what was working, she got into a groove."

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