

Softball Heads Home Heartbroken At WIAC Tourney

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WHITEWATER - The top-seeded UW-Eau Claire softball team had two shots against UW-Stout to win the Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference Championship and earn the conference's automatic bid into the national tournament, but the Blue Devils topped Eau Claire in back-to-back games 6-2 and 4-1 to steal the title and the bid from the Blugolds here today in Whitewater.

Eau Claire will now have to hope for an at-large bid for any chance of continuing play this season. Only three at-large bids are handed out across the country. It is the second straight season the Blugolds have won the WIAC regular season title and carried the top-seed into the tournament but failed to win the bid. Eau Claire earned a 4-2 victory over UW-Stevens Point in the first game of the day and then topped Stout 9-5 to stay undefeated in the tourney heading into the championship games.

The Blugolds came dangerously close to dropping their first game of the day, as they scored a run on a passed ball with two outs in the seventh to tie the game against Stevens Point. Eau Claire was handcuffed for just two hits through six innings and the Pointers held a 1-0 lead heading into the seventh. **Mallory McKinney** (So.-Brooklyn Park, MN/Champlin Park) reached on an error to lead off the seventh and **Jill Janke** (Fr.-Black River Falls) followed with a walk. **Megan Oster** (Fr.-Eau Claire/Immanuel Lutheran) then singled to load the bases but the next two hitters struck out. Pinch runner **Tessa Pecha** (Fr.-Eau Claire/North) tied the game at one when she scored on a two-out passed ball.

The Blugolds got things going in the eighth as they scored three runs for a 4-1 lead. With two on and one out, McKinney hit a sacrifice fly for the go-ahead run. Janke put the game out of the reach as she followed the sac fly with a two-run home run and the Pointers' lone run in the bottom of the eighth was not enough as the Blugolds earned the 4-2 victory.

Eau Claire's next task was Stout as the two teams battled in the first of three games against each other on the day. The Blugolds jumped to a quick lead when Oster led the game off with a home run. **Molly Blakewell** (Sr.-Eau Claire/North) provided more firepower with a two-run blast in the third inning and Janke added an RBI double for a 4-0 Eau Claire lead.

A big error in the bottom of the third paved the way to five unearned runs for the Blue Devils, who were suddenly on top 5-4. Jackie Juan came up with the big blow, a three-run home run with two outs in the inning. The Blugolds tied the game at five in the fifth on an RBI fielder's choice by Janke while the Eau Claire pitching staff limited Stout to just two hits over the final four innings. The Blugolds regained the lead in the sixth with four runs on four hits. **Shannon Barone** (So.-DePere) knocked a two-run double and McKinney and Janke each collected RBIs in the inning. The Blue Devils were unable to mount a late comeback and the Blugolds remained the only team undefeated in the tournament with the 9-5 win.

Stout dispatched of Stevens Point 1-0 to make its way back to the championship bracket and needed to top Eau Claire twice in a row to win the tournament. The Blue Devils walked away with a 6-2 as Eau Claire left nine runners on base and managed just two runs on nine hits. The Blugolds took a 2-0 lead in the third when **Rachel Paulus** (So.-Wisconsin Rapids/Lincoln) stole home and McKinney added an RBI groundout. The lead was short-lived as Stout responded with five runs in the bottom half of the inning. It was Juan again who came up with the big blow, a three-run blast with one out in the inning. The Blugolds were unable to come back from the big inning and fell 6-2 for their first loss of the tournament.

It was winner-take-all in the final game of the tournament as Eau Claire and Stout battled for the third time in one day. The Blugolds again had problems getting the big hit as they stranded 10 runners and collected 10 hits but scored the one run. Stout took a 1-0 lead in the second and then added three more runs on four hits in the fourth for a 4-0 lead.

Eau Claire scored its lone run