COLLEGE SOFTBALL

Cabrillo wins first game of NorCals

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APTOS — Sierra Clark and the Cabrillo College softball team were admittedly “a little bummed” when they received the No. 6 seed in the NorCal Regional Playoffs earlier this week. Earning a home game against No. 11 College of the Sequoias, well, that just seemed a little cruel.

The Central Valley Conference runner-up routed Cabrillo 12-3 earlier this season.

But on Saturday it was a completely different result, as Cabrillo pounded out 12 hits to take the opening game of its first-round NorCal playoff series against Sequoias, 11-3. The game was called in the bottom of the fifth inning due to the eight-run mercy rule.

“The coaches sat us down and said, ‘Listen to what our lineup was then,’” said Sierra Clark, who added that only three Seahawks players were in their normal positions for that game, one of whom, Valerie Silva, was making her junior college debut behind the plate.

“That turned everything around and everyone came out pumped,” Clark said. “It was a completely different team then.”

Clark, who earned the win in the circle after allowing two earned runs on four hits over five innings, lined a two-run single with the bases loaded to end the game. She finished 4-for-4 with a double, two runs scored and two RBIs.

“They scored first in the first inning and I think we were a little frazzled, a little panicked,” said the sophomore Clark, the Pitcher of the Year in the Coast Conference South Division who recently signed on to compete at Cal State East Bay next season. Teammate Sherri Morioka also recently signed with the school.

“But once we started hitting,” Clark added, “that got us going and it settled us down a little bit.”

The Seahawks (31-8), champions of the CC-S this season for the first time since 1980, will look to close out the Giants in their best-of-three series on Sunday at noon. Game 3, if necessary, will follow at 2 p.m.

“We’re really confident with our hitting. That’s our strength right now,” said Cabrillo coach Kristy Ballinger, who was named Coach of the Year in the CC-S this season.

It took one trip through the lineup before the Seahawks found their swing against Sequoias (28-10) starting pitcher Mayleen Mazon, who took the loss.

Well, almost once through the lineup.

With Cabrillo trailing 1-0, No. 9 hitter Emily Payne pulled a two-run triple into left field in the home half of the second inning that supplied the Seahawks the lead for good. An inning later, during the Seahawks’ six-run third inning, Payne pulled a two-run single to left.

Finishing 2-for-3 with four RBIs, Payne said it wasn’t a typical day at the plate.

“No, actually, it’s not,” the Scots Valley High alum said afterward. “I’m more of a small-ball type of player. But they needed me to hit, so I hit. I tried, at least.”

It was a welcoming sign for Payne, who’s been strengthening her arms and legs to help offset her bad back, which she fractured in the fall during soccer season. She was cleared to play on Feb. 1.

Ballinger said Payne can play the small game, but she shouldn’t be labeled as such.

“When there are runners in scoring position, she tends to come up with a big hit,” Ballinger said. “And she did it again today. That was huge.”

The same can be said for the bottom three batters in Cabrillo’s lineup — Elise Amend, Stephanie Wormington and Payne — who were combined 4-for-6 with six RBIs and five runs scored.

The Seahawks batted around in the third, and went from a 2-1 to an 8-1 lead behind RBI hits by Jacky Antuna, Amend and Payne. Wormington drew a bases-loaded walk — one of three issued by Mazon in the inning.

It was 9-1 an inning later when Antuna, who finished 2-for-2 with two RBIs and two runs, hit a sacrifice fly to score Clark. From there, Cabrillo was well on its way to a mercy-rule victory.

One more win and the Seahawks will be on their way to the Super Regionals.

“This is huge for our mental game,” Payne said. “We’re a really positive team overall and it helps us stay at the level we need to be at.”