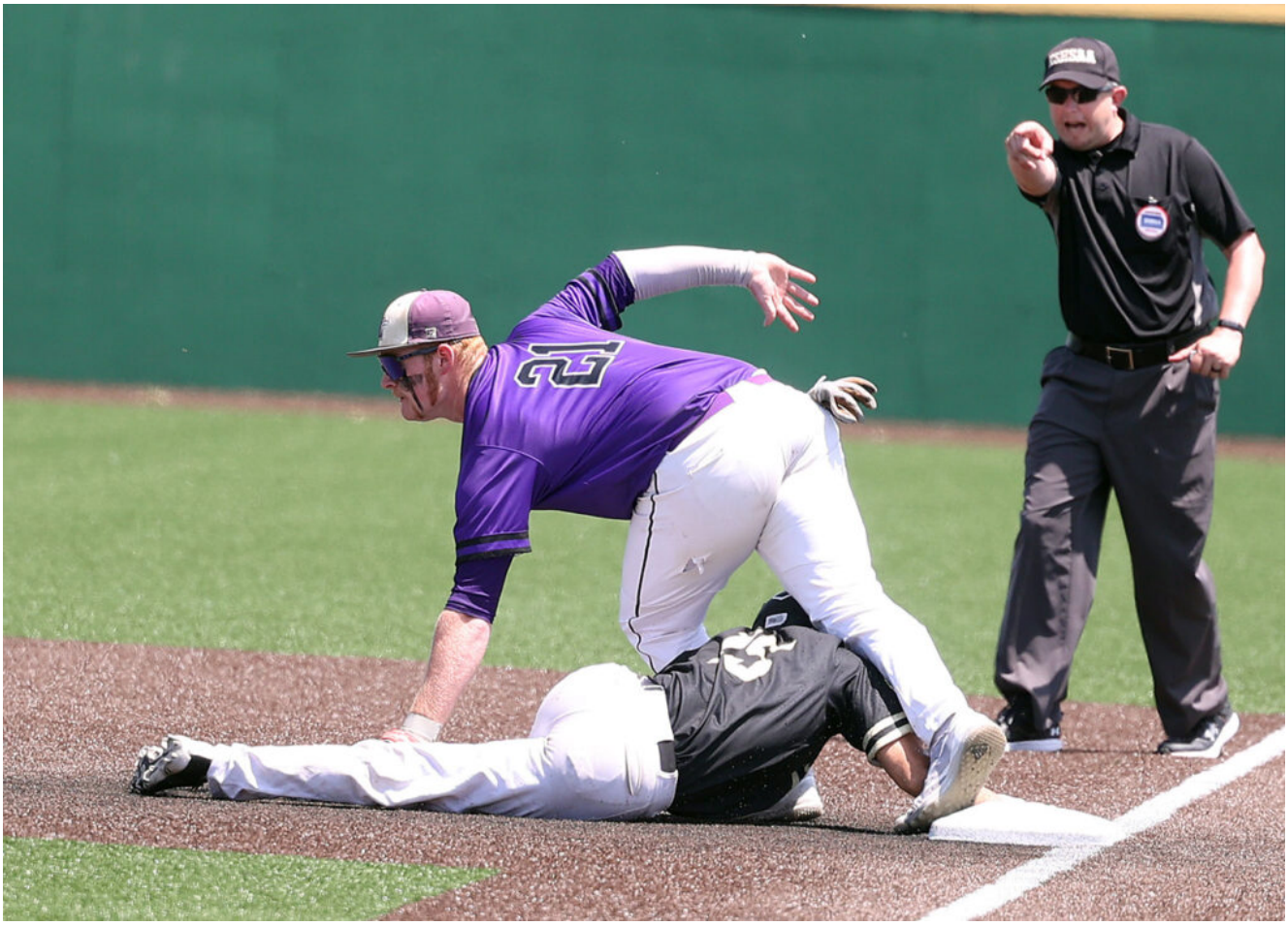
Wildcats fall in first round of state tournament to rival Paola



Louisburg senior Jackson Howard tags out a Paola runner at first base Thursday during the Class 4A state baseball tournament in Salina.

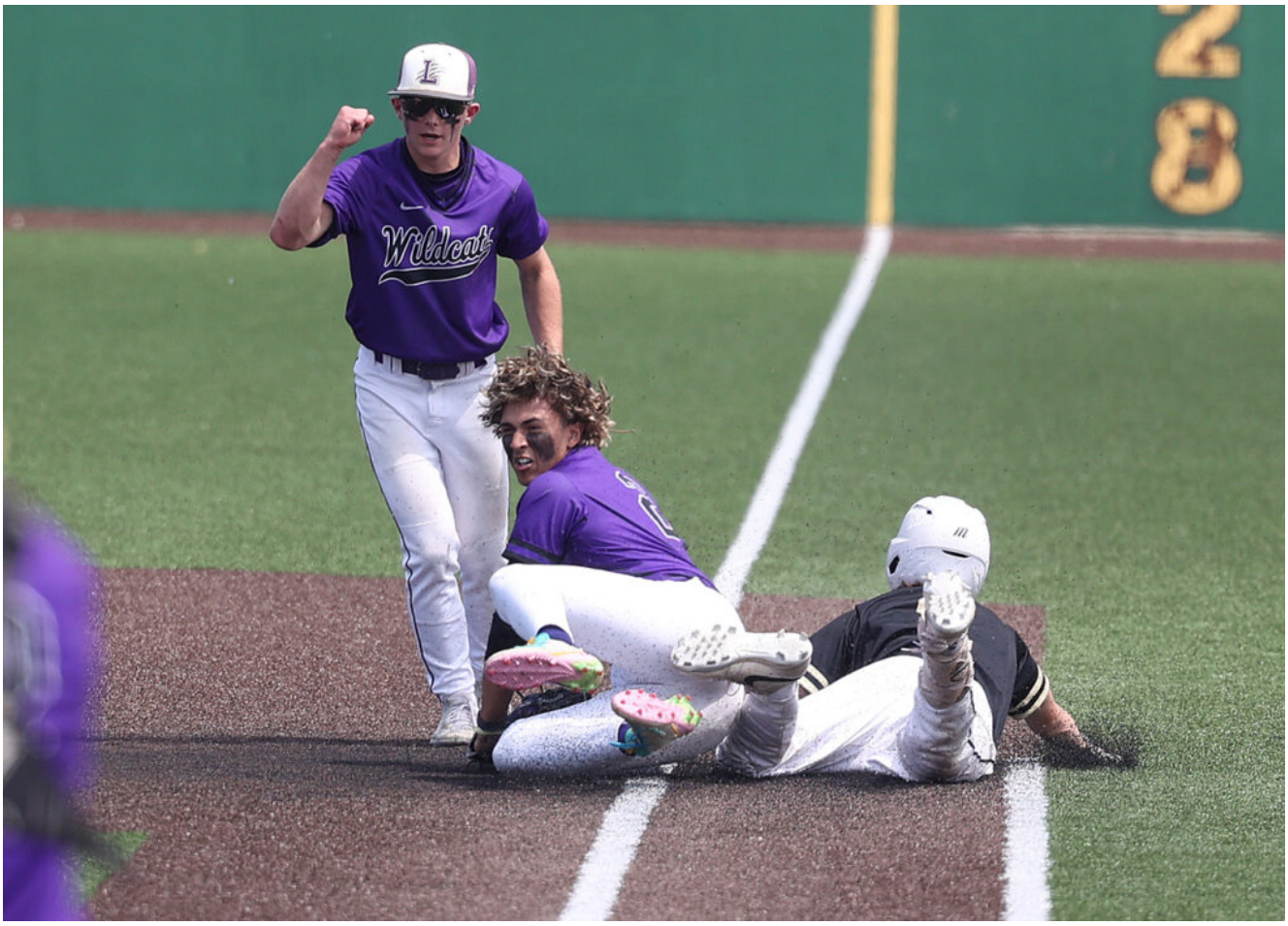
SALINA – It had been 15 years since Louisburg played in the state baseball tournament, and in its first game back, the Wildcats played an all-too-familiar opponent.

Louisburg squared off with Paola on Thursday in the first round of the Class 4A state baseball tournament in Salina. The two teams – a mere 10 miles from each other – traveled nearly three hours to play the most important contest in their rivalry matchup.

Unfortunately for the Wildcats, Paola made a couple more plays down the stretch as Louisburg fell in a pitcher's dual, 3-0, at Dean Evans Stadium.

Paola starter Hunter Loethen kept the Wildcat hitters off-balance most of the contest as he pitched a complete game. He gave up five hits and struck out nine.

"It was a tough loss," Louisburg coach Kade Larson said. "Paola was a really good team. Loethen threw really well and kept us off balance all day. When you get to state, you're going to play a good team and that's exactly what Paola was."



Louisburg junior Alex Saad dives to the first base bag to beat a Paola runner, while senior Brody McGreer celebrates the play Thursday in Salina.

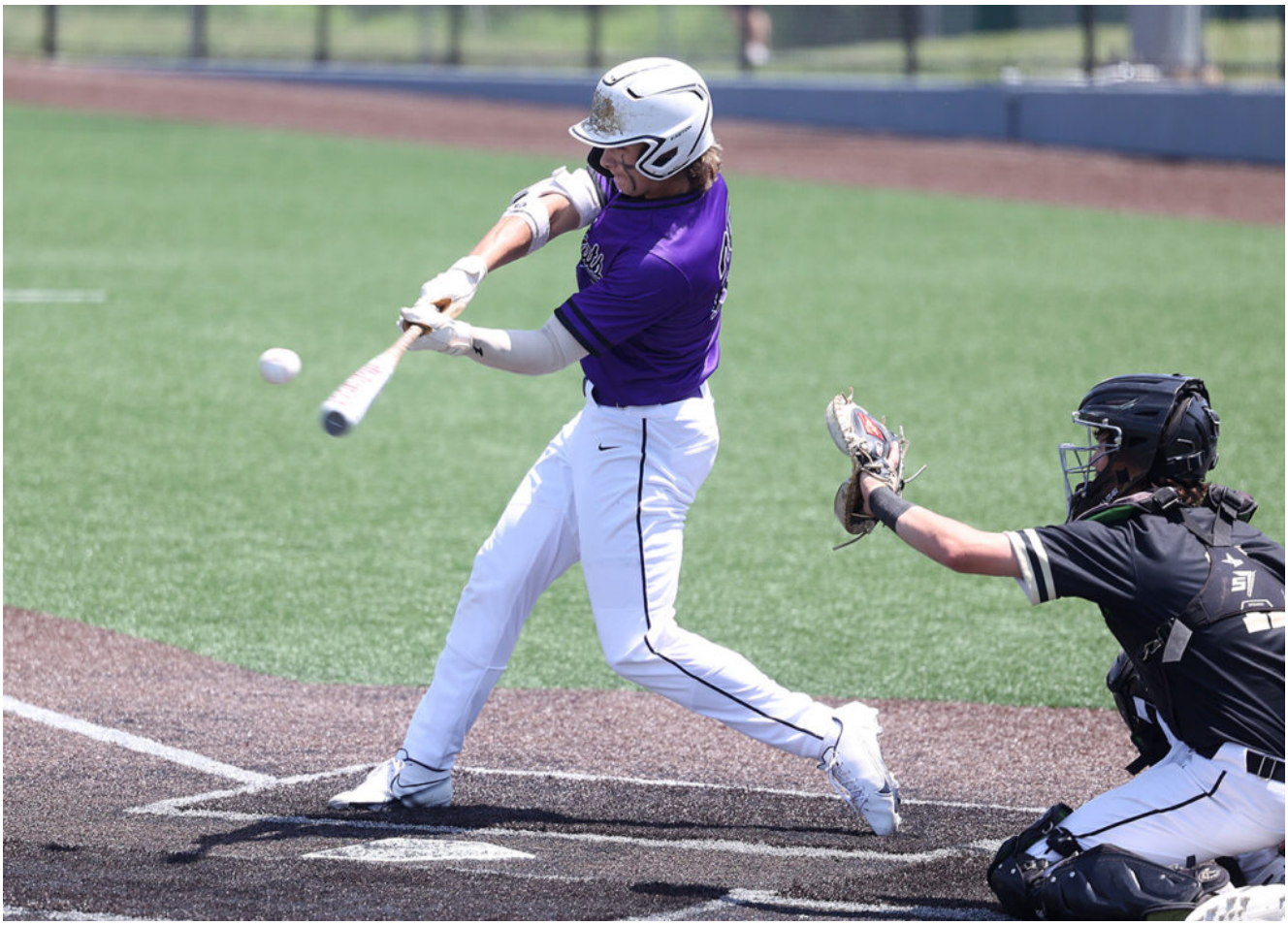
Louisburg got a good performance out of its starter, Alex Saad. The Louisburg junior went five innings and gave up just one unearned run and had five strikeouts.

He had to work around trouble in a couple of the innings as the Wildcats committed six errors on the day, but Paola had just the one run through five innings.

Offensively, the Wildcats had a few chances against Loethen, but Louisburg couldn’t get the big hit to break the game open.

“Alex threw really well for us,” Larson said. “He came out ready to go and kept us in the game. We had a few chances on offense to get ahead, but just couldn’t get the timely hit.”

The game was scoreless until the fourth inning, when Paola scored in the top of the frame that was aided on a pair of Louisburg errors.



Louisburg senior Jack Anderson makes contact with a pitch Thursday against Paola.

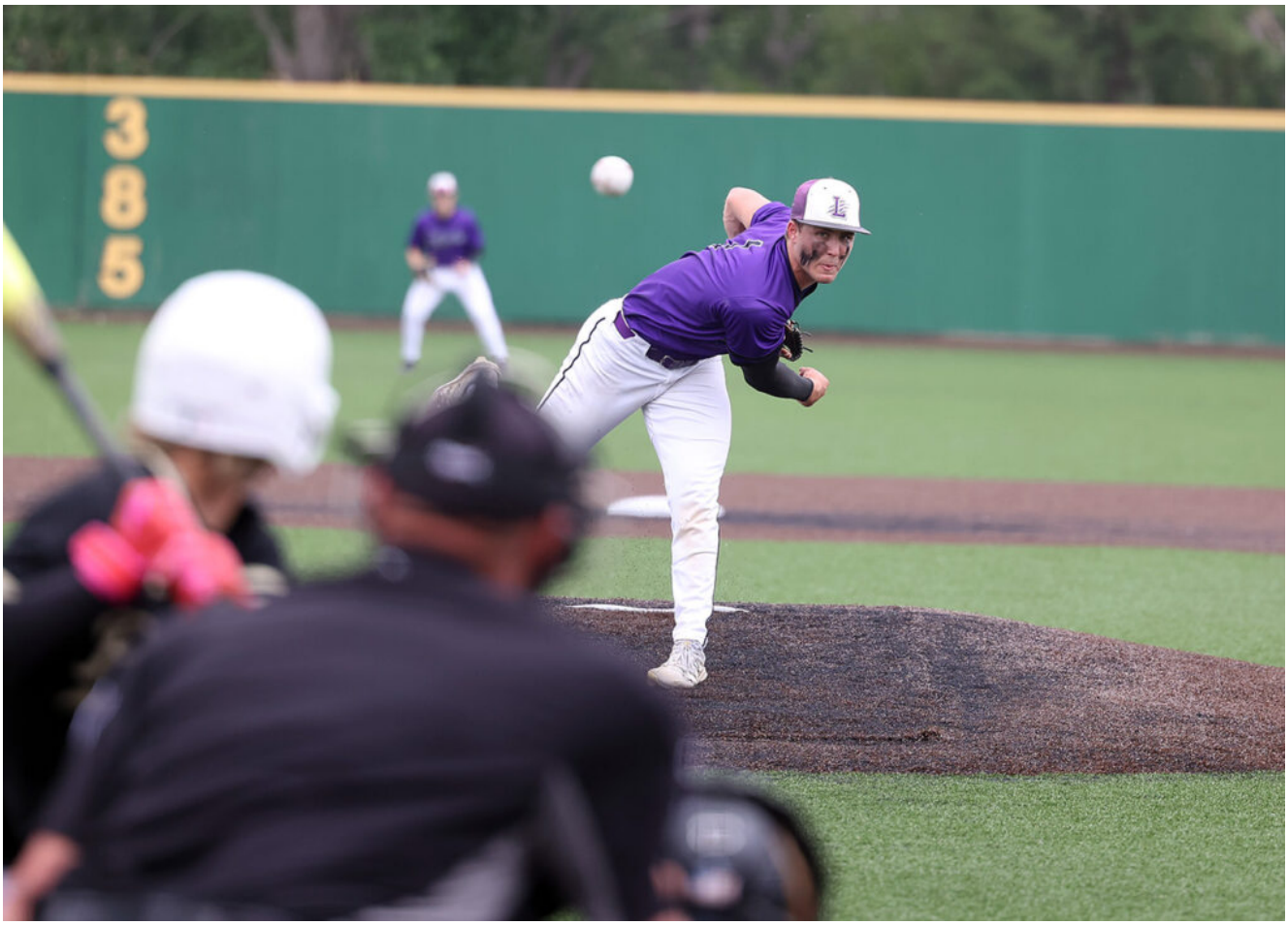
The Wildcats got things going offensively in the bottom of the fifth when junior Meade Rutherford and senior Brody McGreer hit back-to-back singles, but were erased on an inning-ending

double play.

Louisburg senior Declan Battle came in for relief in the top of the sixth inning and got out of a bases loaded jam with a pair of strikeouts.

It was still a 1-0 game in the top of the seventh, when the Panthers scratched a pair of runs across to all but seal the win.

Senior Nathaniel Lamm doubled for Louisburg in the bottom of the seventh to try and get something started, but the rally stalled out.



Louisburg senior Declan Battle pitched the final two innings Thursday against Paola.

McGreer had two of the Wildcats' five hits to lead the team offensively, while senior Jack Anderson, Lamm and Rutherford had the other four hits.

Paola went on to face the eventual state champion, Rock Creek, in the semifinals, before losing to the Mustangs and then again to Abilene in the third place game.

As for Louisburg, it was a special 2024 season that included its first Frontier League championship since 2002 and its first regional title since 2009. The Wildcats also recorded the most wins in team history with a 19-7 record.

“We had a great season this year,” Larson said. “We really had a blast throughout the season and did some things that haven’t been done for a long time in Louisburg. It was definitely a memorable one that none of us will ever forget.”