

## WHS Baseball Opens Season Tuesday

Written by Mike Kelly

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The Watauga High baseball team begins another chapter in the Pete Hardee era.

The Pioneers, who have produced three consecutive winning seasons and back-to-back Northwestern 3A/4A Conference regular-season championships, will probably put their deepest team, especially in the pitching department, on the field since 1998. It's been a while, but the Pioneers, despite a minor shoulder injury to their ace Dylan Norris, feature a formidable pitching staff that can be extremely efficient this season.

"We are deep in pitching," said Hardee, who begins his 16 year at the helm. "Dylan has a little tweak in his pitching shoulder. It really isn't anything serious, but we're being cautious this early in the year. But our pitching staff is pretty deep. Jake (Watts) really came into his own last year, and Ethan Greene has looked solid as well this off season. We're extremely confident in the people we're putting out there every night."

Watts will get the starting nod Tuesday night when the Pioneers begin the 2011 campaign in Asheville against A.C. Reynolds. Watts really established himself as a spot starter/reliever last spring. And the numbers don't lie.

Watts, who will attend Milligan College, an NAIA school in Johnson City, TN, this fall to continue his baseball career, was 3-2 with a 2.82 earned-run-average and a save. He gave up just 18 earned runs in 44 2/3 innings of work. The righthander also struck out 44 men and gave up just 16 walks.

"Jake really became the ace of our pitching staff late last season," Hardee said. "He went up against some of the best non-conference teams on our schedule and handled himself very well. His fastball looks real good right now, and breaking stuff is real impressive.

"He had a very good outing last Saturday in a scrimmage against Mount Tabor. And he finished his final inning real strong. He's ready to go."

And Watts will be facing an A.C. Reynolds team that made it to the Class 4A state quarterfinals last season. They lost to Porter Ridge 1-0 in a rain-shortened game. Head coach Brian Craig is in his ninth year with the Rockets. He's 125-80 during that stretch. The Rockets were 16-11 last season, and dating back to 2006, the Rockets own a slight edge in the series against WHS with six wins and five losses.

"And we've had our problems winning down there," Hardee said. "We had some games where we lost leads late in the game. But it's always a good matchup with A.C. Reynolds. They've lost some key players from last year, but they'll be a good test for us in our opener."

The Rockets return five seniors and four starters, but the biggest loss was Phillip Treadway, currently a freshman at Western Carolina. He was the Rockets big home run hitter the last two years. He belted 15 last season breaking the single-season school record of 12 set by head coach Brian Craig in 1988.

But the Pioneers have some holes to fill themselves. Two of their biggest losses to graduation were shortstop Cal Hardee (currently a freshman at Appalachian State) and second baseman

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Josh Wyant (a freshman at Winston-Salem State). Hardee is counting on Max Linville and Ryan Turner to fill those slots.

"You can't replace Cal and Josh," Hardee said. "They were a great keystone combination at second and short. But Ryan is a versatile guy on the infield, and Max played a lot of shortstop last season when Cal was pitching. Those guys will have their moments, but I'm very confident in their abilities.

"And I'm real confident in the makeup of this team. Our outfield has a lot of speed, and I just feel we have the players to be a contender this season. We want to be one of the top teams in the West."

The Pioneers, who won't play their first home game until March 19, travel to North Davidson on Thursday, then it's off to play Ardey Kell in Charlotte on Saturday. Oldies 100.7 FM will carry the A.C. Reynolds and the North Davidson games this week. Our coverage on Tuesday begins at 5:30 pm.

**NOTES:** The Pioneers are ranked ninth in the Impact Baseball Class 4A Pre-Season Poll. Ardey Kell is No.1. Providence, led by former WHS assistant coach Danny Hignite is third in that poll. Hickory is honorable mention in Class 3A....Wilkes Central is 4th in the Class 2A poll and West Wilkes, which won the state championship last spring and is coached by former WHS assistant coach Ben Welborn, is eighth in the Class 1A poll.